



25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

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Resources and Development Committee meets with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on proposed Region 9 AUM remediation efforts



Resources and Development Committee Chair Brenda Jesus encouraged a unified strategy moving forward in addressing Abandoned Uranium Mine remediation.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – The Resources and Development Committee recently met with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at Twin Arrows Casino and Resort for a government-to-government consultation on cleanup work in the Lukachukai Mountain Mining District.

The meeting brought together representatives from the U.S. EPA, the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency, and regional chapter officials.

“The impacts of abandoned uranium mines on our lands and people have been devastating. AUM sites are scattered across the Navajo Nation, contaminating community water tables, while residual contamination continues to affect livestock and wildlife,” said RDC Chair Brenda Jesus. “This is an ongoing environmental justice issue we have discussed for decades. We need to move forward with a unified strategy.”

In 2015, the Navajo Nation received more than \$40 million from a \$1 billion Tronox bankruptcy settlement to address over 50 abandoned uranium mines. However, remediation efforts have remained limited, and Chair Jesus emphasized stronger coordination among agencies and tribal entities to accelerate progress.

U.S. EPA Region 9 provided updates for sites including Cove Transfer Station, Northeast Church Rock, Quivera, Sections 32/33 and 9, Charles Huskon Nos. 12 and 14, Ruby Mines, and the Mariano Lake/Mac and Black Jack areas.

U.S. EPA Region 9 Superfund and Emergency Management Division Director Michael Montgomery said the agency's priority is advancing projects into construction and noted ongoing cleanup in the Cove area, where one AUM site has been capped in place.

Chair Jesus reiterated that the Navajo Nation must be fully engaged in remediation design and decision-making.

Eastern Navajo Land Commission Office Director Leonard Tsosie raised concerns about proposed remediation plans in the Eastern Navajo Agency, including Northeast Church Rock, Mariano Lake/Mac, Black Jack, Quivera, and Ruby Mines, saying proposed repository sites have not received full Navajo Nation support.

"The Thoreau Red Rock repository site is not yet permitted, yet it is being advanced to address AUMs in Church Rock and Casamero Lake," Tsosie said. "Without Navajo Nation approval, there has been no true government-to-government consultation."

Delegate Danny Simpson also urged increased consultation with allottees and Navajo Nation leadership. "We are committed to getting these sites cleaned up—they are major concerns," he said. "But it's unclear how many residents in impacted areas have been consulted."

Montgomery responded that consultation with chapters, Navajo leadership, and local allottees is ongoing, adding that some residents support closing the mines.

On the proposed regional repository, Montgomery said the EPA supports the site as a well-monitored facility and noted no other locations in New Mexico currently have state support.

"If waste rock is to be moved off the Eastern Navajo Agency, this is the most viable option," Montgomery said, adding the decision followed consultation with the Navajo Nation, though it has not been universally supported.

Cove Chapter President James Benally thanked the RDC for organizing the update and highlighted cancer rates in his community.

"We don't have a lot of elderly men. Our community has been decimated by cancer," Benally said. "Many ask if remediation will happen in their lifetime. We need to eliminate the legacy of abandoned uranium mines."

Navajo Nation EPA Executive Director Stephen Etsitty said the consultation also served to remind the U.S. EPA of its decision to place the Bonita Peak Mining District near Silverton, Colo., on the National Priorities List, enabling continued cleanup of the Gold King Mine and 47 additional hard rock sites.

Etsitty emphasized how the Superfund program is funded through national tax collections and how NPL designation helps guarantee long-term cleanup funding.

He added that the EPA briefed Navajo Nation leadership on plans to consolidate and cap 13,000 cubic yards of contaminated material from the Mesa V complex at an estimated cost of \$13 million. This phase addresses three of 88 AUM sites in the Lukachukai Mountain Mining District, with additional consultations expected.

Council Delegate Otto Tso emphasized that the Nation must determine which direction to pursue.

“We have established in writing a two-day consultation approach,” Tso said. “The Navajo Nation asked for consultation before proposals move forward. Remediation efforts must proceed in the direction the Nation chooses.”

RDC members reiterated that all future efforts must include formal government-to-government consultation with the Navajo Nation.

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