



Olga Smirnova, right, and other visitors look out over the site the 1979 uranium tailings spill during a tour of UNC Section 17 in Churchrock Saturday.

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Environmental tourists

Russian-American peers compare notes on mining impact

First in a two-part series

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CHURCHROCK — Physicians and scientists from Russia, and a Mongolian non-governmental organization representative visited residents of Red Water Pond Road Saturday to get a first-hand look at a community impacted by uranium mining.

Paul Robinson of the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque said SRIC and the Russian delegation are involved in a health-risk research dialogue as part of U.S.-Russia Peer-to-Peer Dialogue



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Chris Shuey, center, and Paul Robinson from the Southwest Research and Information Center show a map to visitors from Russia and Mongolia during a tour of UNC section 17 in Churchrock Saturday.

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A van carrying visiting delegates pulls onto Red Water Pond Road during a tour of UNC section 17 in Churchrock Saturday.

Environmental tourists

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program. Funded through a U.S. State Department grant and Russia Foreign Ministry funds, the program is designed to foster greater contacts between Americans and Russians.

"We're trying to share best methods on health risk research between the two countries," Robinson said. The research is related to communities with contamination from different forms of mining.

"The doctors are from a region in Buryati near Lake Baikal, which had molybdenum and tungsten mining from World War II until 1991 — 50 million tons of tailings, no containments," he said. "It washed through town and there was a lot of exposure."

Health impacts

Similar to the United States, there's more attention to environmental cleanup in Russia than identification of health impacts and compensation to people.

"There is a law for cleanup of places that are 'people catastrophes,'" Robinson said. "But you have to have evidence of proof of health damage — not exposure, not ingestion — but the health disease damage."

The DINEH study, which is focused on families affected by uranium tailings and abandoned mines, could benefit SRIC's Russian peers, according to Robinson. Evidence obtained by Johnnye Lewis, Ph.D., and Chris Shuey, director of SRIC, shows cardiovascular disease and immunodis-ease for people living near abandoned uranium mines.

"That's evidence of health damage," Robinson said. "So the models of how that research was done — the surveying, the environmental sampling, the statistical analysis — those are the individual methods that we're sharing."

Two members of the Russian delegation, Olga Ustinova and Svetlana Vekovshinina, are working with Buryat groups to develop a health research study in the town of Zakamensk, where the molybdenum mine was located, Robinson said.

Olga Smirnova, Ph.D., sen-

ior researcher and geochemist at the Geological Institute of the Siberian Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences, "has been the singular person, with her late husband, who characterized the waste in this town of Zakamensk," Shuey said.

"The pictures are just devastating. These piles of waste up against apartment complexes, in the river, kids running across the river," he said. "We see a lot of commonalities between her data from that site and the kind of data that we have from here and out in Tachee and other places around Navajo."

After touring the Chevron Questa Mine in Taos County to view reclamation of the former molybdenum mine, and the uranium mine sites in Churchrock, Smirnova said, "We have the same problems with the waste piles."

She said the tours provided a lot of useful information about the methods of dealing with those problems.

Complex issue

The complexity of the existing human health issues resulting from the environmental impacts is enormous, a high-ranking Russian physician said.

"The only way to approach this problem and possibly solve this problem is in cooperation and unity with multiple groups that have to do with these issues — government agencies, private corporations, indigenous groups, health care systems," Olga Ustinova, deputy director for Healthcare Services at the Federal Scientific Center for Medical and Preventive Health Risk Management in Perm, Russia, said, speaking through an interpreter.

"The complex matters have to have complex solutions that will require more than one group or one agency," she said.

Of special concern are the challenges facing indigenous people who are trying to preserve their way of life, such as Navajo.

"The mines are on their land," Ustinova said. "So if you allow mining activities to continue, you have to make sure that the highest technology or the safest methods are being used, and the strictest

plan of protection is in place to preserve the uniqueness of the lifestyle of these people, and to preserve life itself.

"We have very similar problems in Russia," she said. Ustinova equated it to a saying they have which roughly means "to take the cream off the top," or "leave the area and leave the people behind with all the problems that our activities created," she said.

Through the Peer-to-Peer Dialogue program, Ustinova said they had seen scientists at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque who are involved in solving the health risk problem.

"The most valuable experience for me is to see these types of plans being put in action here in the United States," she said. "The plans and the programs are a mutual effort from the local community, indigenous people and scientific community."

Moving the elephant

Tony Hood of Red Water Pond Road community, attended the three-day seminar with the Russian-Mongolian delegations and said he was impressed by their degree of professionalism and technical knowledge.

"They talked about similar issues concerning mine waste over there. The Russians mined molybdenum and tungsten for the Cold War to build tanks," he said. "In a remote area they built a town overnight to mine all the metals, and when the war went kaput, they just left everything — the waste — similar to here, and the waste is making them sick."

"There's one town they showed where the mine is on a hill and all the runoff is going completely across the town and depositing the minerals at a lower elevation where they're seeing new rock formations from all those metals mixing together," he said. "Over there, President Putin knows about the contamination and he assigned all the scientists and all the people to do something about it."

Hood said that if the Navajo Nation saw that others are concerned about Navajo health risks from abandoned uranium mines, maybe they would become more involved.

Ustinova said the delegation appreciates Robinson's attempt "to move the elephant from the dead spot," or "to start solving the problem by involving governmental agencies and the scientific community."

"The work that Paul and Chris are doing in their organization is unique because they are putting lots of effort and they are coordinating the efforts of multiple organizations to come in unity and start solving this problem," she said. "They're heroes."

More Americans need to take the mine tour and get familiar with SRIC's work, Ustinova said.

"We are tourists. We are here today, we are going tomorrow," she said. "But the local people, the U.S. people, once they get in contact with these issues first-hand, they will be able to do something about it — get involved and have positive action, positive impact and participate in solutions."

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