

Church Rock Spill: 30 Years Later

Grandmothers in wheelchairs, babies in strollers, adults of all ages, and Navajo Nation leaders were among the estimated 250 people who participated in events surrounding the 30th anniversary of the Church Rock Uranium Mill Tailings Spill in the Churchrock Chapter on July 16. The day-long series of events was sponsored by the Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment, or MASE, a coalition of community groups affected by nearly 60 years of uranium mining impacts in northwestern New Mexico.

An overcast sky provided shade for about 125 people who, beginning at 7:00 am, walked nearly five miles from the home of Bertha and Teddy Nez next to the abandoned Northeast Church Rock Mine, past the site of the July 16, 1979 tailings dam break, and to a stage set up on the back of a flatbed trailer on the grazing lands of Larry J. King, whose extended families live across State Highway 566 from the site of abandoned Old Churchrock Mine and the location of proposed *in situ* leach mining.

Students from Duke University joined contemporaries from Crownpoint Middle School on the King Ranch to listen to talks by local officials and the signing of a proclamation by Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., declaring July 16, 2009 as “Uranium Legacy Remembrance and Action Day.”

Churchrock Chapter Vice President Robinson Kelly, a former uranium miner, welcomed the marchers and recounted his personal experiences witnessing the aftermath of the spill — the largest one-time release of radioactive wastes, by volume, in U.S. history. Kelly said he was preparing to go to work at one of the local underground mines when his uncle warned family members not to go into the Puerco River.

“He knew something was wrong,” Kelly said. “He said the water wasn’t right, that it had a strange yellow color and smelled.” Kelly said his uncle later waded through the fluids to round up some of the family’s horses, only to receive burns on his feet and legs from exposure to the acidic tailings effluent that poured from a 35-foot breach in the United Nuclear Corp. tailings dam.

Churchrock Chapter Secretary-Treasurer Louise Jim, State Representative Sandra Jeff, Bluewater Valley Downstream Alliance member Candace Head-Dylla, and MASE coordinator Nadine Padilla joined President Shirley in the signing of the proclamation. Shirley said he wanted the world to know that the Navajo Nation would not forget impacts of the tailings spill and remains resolved to implementing



Red Water Pond Road community members prepare for the walk to commemorate the Church Rock Uranium Mill Tailings Spill.



Leona Morgan (R) with unidentified friend carry sign during the walk.



(L to R) Clinton Jim, Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., SRIC Staffers Sarah Henio-Adeky and Chris Shuey.

and enforcing the Navajo Nation’s 2005 law banning uranium mining and processing in Navajo Country.

“We, the Diné, will never forget the devastation that uranium mining and processing has wrought on the health, safety and natural resources of our Nation,” Shirley said, reading from the proclamation. “We call on the federal government and private industry to undertake and complete, within the next decade, a comprehensive plan to resolve the Uranium Legacy throughout the U.S.”

George Arthur, chairman of the Navajo Nation Council’s Resources Committee and principal author of the Diné Natural Resources Protection Act (DNRPA), the Navajo law banning uranium development, joined residents of the Puerco River valley from New Mexico and Arizona at a luncheon at Churchrock Chapter House following the morning march. Arthur reminded the crowd that the Navajo Nation asked Congress for at least \$500 million to close abandoned uranium mines, restore environmental resources, and study community health

at a hearing before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform of the U.S. House of Representatives on October 23, 2007.

Likening the need to address the Uranium Legacy on the Navajo Nation to the United States’ assistance to rebuild Japan following the atomic bombings in 1945, Arthur said, “We are seeing some progress, but we are still waiting for our reparations.” He said he wants all radioactive wastes from uranium mining and milling eventually removed from Navajo Nation lands.

The day’s events concluded with screenings of *The River That Harms*, a 1988 documentary on the tailings spill, and *Poison Wind*, a 2007 documentary on the Uranium Legacy, at the University of New Mexico-Gallup campus. A panel discussion featuring representatives of MASE member groups followed.

One of the panelists, Linda Evers, a founder of the Post-71 Uranium Workers Committee of Grants, presented the results of the group’s survey of people who worked in the uranium industry after 1971, but who are not eligible for compensation for radiation-induced health problems under provisions of the federal Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, or RECA. Evers, herself a uranium mill worker in the late-1970s, said the group’s survey revealed that post-1971 workers believe their current illnesses are from their uranium work and that proper

health and safety protections were not adequate or, in many cases, were unavailable to workers during the 1970s and 1980s after federal uranium mine safety requirements and radiation exposure standards had been adopted. (See related article on pages 2–3.)



Attendees of the Church Rock Spill Commemoration listen to the speakers.



(L to R) Churchrock chapter vice president Robinson Kelly, Secretary-Treasurer Louise Jim, State Representative Sandra Jeff, and Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr.

Church Rock Tailings: Spill Facts

Several documents related to the July 16, 1979 Church Rock Uranium Milling Tailings Spill are available on SRIC’s web site, www.sric.org. Salient facts about the spill include:

- 1,100 tons of radioactive tailings and 94 million gallons of acidic wastewater were released to the Puerco River in the spill.
- Causes of the break in the UNC tailings dam included differential settlement of parts of the dam overlying bedrock and alluvium, failure to repair cracks in the dam, and exceeding limits on the volume and level of fluids in holding ponds in back of the dam.
- Spill fluids traveled at least 80 miles downstream in the Puerco River from the UNC tailings impoundment located about 13 miles northeast of Gallup, NM, to Chambers, AZ.
- A U.S. Geological Survey study published in 1994 found that over parts of three decades (1960–62, 1968–1986), mine dewatering released about 260 Curies of radioactive materials to the Puerco River, compared with 47 Curies released in the one-time tailings spill.