Living with Uranium Wastes for 50 Years and Four Generations — A Navajo Community’s Perspective

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History of Our Community

The Red Water Pond Road Community Association (RWPRCA) was formed in 2006 to give community members a voice for our community. The Government decided to clean up uranium mine tailings and readmissions that are on the Navajo Nation northeast of Gallup, NM. We take our organization’s name from a look down road that is the main thoroughfare through our community—a road that was made of mine waste in the early 1970s to allow for the development of one of the two underground uranium mines that still saddle our community today.

We trace our living in this place of Dine’ b’egii (the Navajo Nation in the Navajo language) in northeastern New Mexico back at least 200 years. Our great grandparents raised sheep, corn and squash and used native plants that flourished when there was more rain and sunshine. Our grandmother, Katherine Duncan Bell, and her brother Benny, tended to the sheep when they were children (photo, top left). My grandfather, Tom Bellamy, was a sheep herder, farmer, and medicine man (photo, bottom left). In the 1940’s, he had to reduce his flock during the sheep reduction era mandated by the Federal Government (document, bottom right). The livestock reduction was traumatic for many Navis who witnessed Government agents shooting and killing animals to enforce grazing restrictions.

When the mining companies started coming to the community in the 1950’s, our grandmother beseeched Duncan pulled out survey stakes because she didn’t want “outsiders” there. Katherine Duncan Bell later went to Coyote Canyon Chapter to oppose uranium mining. She was ignored. We did not get our consent as is now required by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Lithium Exploration

Lithium exploration began in the 1990’s on parts of 500,000 acres of tribal trust land, including lands on what would become the site of the Northwest Church Rock Mine (NCRCM). Later, the Navajo Nation approved a lease for Kerr McGee and ICI. And in 1974, construction began on the United Nuclear Corp. (UNC) uranium mine and tailings piles, which operated between 1977 and 1982. The two underground mines shut down in 1983 (map at right).

When my mother was young, our home was between two uranium mines and half a mile away from a mill. These areas are now fenced that prevented entry for other children my age from crossing. Playing and exploring was a favorite pastime. My family had a flock of sheep that grazed on these hillsides and were killed when ordering from the Navajo Corp. or USGA. My entire generation has been affected and we will never recover our way of life as we have always known.

Citizen Science

Twenty years after the mines and mill closed, RWPRCA members did field work to document soil contamination in the community:

- monitored gamma radiation as part of CRUMP (2002-2007) (top photos)
- worked with grad students to assess uranium in soil near residences (2004-2006) (map)
- adopted resolution addressing uranium issue (2006)
- gave blood and urine samples as part of DSENH Kidney Health Project (2006)
- testified at Wastewater Hearing (2007)
- complimented on behalf of Federal Agencies Five-Year Plan (2008)

We had to place our household belongings in storage containers and our homes were covered in plastic. In the first cleanup, several families were moved to a motel on the west side of Gallup (some 20 miles away). The second and third times, we were moved to an apartment and motel, about 15 miles away, for periods of seven and five months. The children and grandchildren were not used to being quiet, and there were complaints about us. We knew that it was important to remove the contaminated dirt to reduce our exposures, but we never thought that our “temporary housing” would create such upheaval in our families.

— Bertha Nes

Risk Reduction and Community Trauma: Contaminated Soil Removals, 2007-2012

Since 2007, our community has conducted 8 soil cleanups under the 2007 Clean-up Plan in partnership with the USEPA and the US Department of Energy. The cleanups were in response to elevated radiation levels in our yards and homes. The cleanups were performed by Environmental Management Services, a subcontractor of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

Livestock Concerns (2005-2006)

1979 Mill Tailings Spill, mine dewatering, 1968-1986

Changing Landscapes (2004-prenent)

Flash Flooding Threaten Bridges, Mine Wastes, Mill Tailings

Exposures Across Generations

Current Clean-up Plan

What’s the Future Look Like for Our Community?

Uranium mining impacts on our community are now 50 years old, and the Don Blankenship Government announcement that it would be considering the final clean-up plan that would take another 20 years to complete. As we think about this long and painful experience, we have four main areas of concern:

- We have observed changes in the condition of the land, the vegetation, water, and air;
- There has been a loss of place; our population has declined because the younger generation doesn’t want to stay here;
- The health of the people is deteriorating and the livestock are less vibrant;
- No comprehensive health studies have been conducted;
- Will the land be restored? Will it support life?

Community Actions to Address Exposures

We never planned on being environmental justice activists, but we’ve had to take action to remember the Navajo uranium legacy and to advocate for the restoration of our land, our families and our health. This is bit of our actions over the past decade and a half:

- Formed an organization (2005-2007)
- Testified before Navajo Nation Council, NM legislature, and US House of Representatives “Waste Hearing,” Oct. 23 2007; before,

- Participated in radiation monitoring, soil sampling and air monitoring as part of the Church Rock Uranium Monitoring Project (2002-2007); led to identification of contamination from the NCRCM mine areas, petitioning USEPA to address the situation through the Superfund law (2008-2010);
- Organized annual Uranium Tailings Spill Commemoration March (2008-2018)
- Joined the Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment (MASE) as a core group (2008)
- Contracted with USEP Region V for outreach services (2012-2016)
- Testified before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2012)
- Gave a talk at the Albuquerque Peace Center (2014);
- Participated in Human Rights meetings in Atlanta GA, December 2017;
- Hosted Russian Mongolian and Japanese delegations (2008-2016)
- Collaborated with the UWM Indigenous Design and Planning Institute to develop a new community (2022-2023)
- Attended Western Mining Action Network annual meetings in Salt Lake City (2010), San Carlos Apache Reservation (2010), and Kamloops, B.C. (2010)
- Conducted interviews and site visits with many media outlets, including New York Times, Huffington Post, National Geographic, Gallup Independent, and Navajo Times.

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