

Churchrock Uranium Spill – 31 years later

Residents living near the former United Nuclear Corporation (UNC) Northeast Church Rock Mine and Church Rock Uranium Mill commemorated the 31st anniversary of the 1979 Church Rock uranium mill tailings spill with a sunrise prayer, walk and gathering on July 16, 2010. Sponsored by the Red Water Pond Road Community Association (RWPRCA) and Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment (MASE), the event attracted about 75 people from communities affected by uranium development throughout the Colorado Plateau. Activists from Grand Junction, Colorado, and Milan, New Mexico, joined Navajo community members to draw attention to the continued need for cleanup of abandoned uranium mines and groundwater contamination at mill sites. Progress addressing the ongoing legacy of past uranium development comes at a time when industry is re-opening old mines in Utah, proposing construction of the first new uranium mill in the U.S. in 30 years in west-central Colorado, and joining Japanese firms to build near underground mines near Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor), 20 miles north of Grants, New Mexico.



About 40 people participated in a two-mile walk from the home of Teddy and Bertha Nez near the Northeast Church Rock Mine to a spot on State Route 566 across from the location where the a dam holding mill tailings and acidic wastewater collapsed in the early morning of July 16, 1979. The accident sent 1,100 tons of tailings and 94 million gallons of wastewater down the Puerco River. The spill remains the largest release of radioactive wastes, by volume, in U.S. history, and is second only to the 1986 Chernobyl reactor meltdown in total radioactivity released.

After the walk, participants in the event gathered outside the Nez residence to share local foods and hear reports on the progress of cleanup of the Northeast Church Rock Mine and the adjacent Kerr-McGee Church Rock I Mine. Organizers say they plan to make the gathering an annual event to highlight the need for reclamation of mine sites throughout the region and to maintain vigilance over proposals for new mining and milling in both Indian and non-Indian communities. ✈



In Memoriam

Gail Naomi Ryba

SRIC joins literally hundreds of other New Mexicans in sending condolences to Tom and Lynn Robey and other members of the family on the death of Gail Naomi Ryba on May 7, 2010.

As Executive Director of the Coalition for Clean Affordable Energy, Gail was an outstanding leader

and advocate for energy efficiency, renewable energy, and other policies to address climate change that affected all New Mexicans. (See her "Using Energy Wisely," *Voices from the Earth*, Winter 2007.)

As a bicycle enthusiast and advocate, she founded the Bicycle Coalition of New Mexico and her work directly created hundreds of miles of bike paths and trails. While her smile, sense of humor, intellect, commitment, and strategic thinking are sorely missed, her many accomplishments live on!

Reopening the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act

Recently a delegation of uranium-impacted community members from New Mexico traveled to Washington, DC to share concerns with Congress about the uranium legacy that continues to haunt our communities. It's been more than thirty years since uranium mining ended in New Mexico, but its destructive practice and devastating legacy of contamination continues to impact our families and communities. The mining companies were allowed to abandon uranium mines and not do any type of reclamation. Today, communities are still struggling to find resources to reclaim contaminated areas and restore our environment to a safe and healthy place for all.

These were the messages we took to Congress as we made the trip to make policy recommendations. In particular, we asked them to support legislation that would clarify the right of states to use Abandoned Mine Land (AML) funds for non-coal reclamation. If this passes, it could mean millions of dollars for states like New Mexico to begin reclamation of abandoned uranium mines. While the price tag of uranium reclamation in NM is easily in the billions of dollars, this legislation would be the first step in addressing a very serious problem.

Along with uranium contamination of the land, air, and water, former uranium workers and community members have been exposed to harmful radiation levels. High rates of cancer, reproductive disorders, respiratory problems, and other ailments are prevalent in our communities. The Post-71 Uranium Workers Committee was created to focus specifically on finding solutions to the health problems of uranium workers that worked in the mines after 1971. Currently under the Radiation Exposure and Compensation Act (RECA), mine workers that worked prior to 1971 are eligible for compensation to help cover medical expenses for eight types of health problems caused from working in the mines. Although RECA has helped out many workers by paying for necessary medical care, the current RECA law leaves out post-1971 miners, mill workers, and transporters. Earlier this year, federal legislation was introduced to correct this problem. The introduction of RECA reform legislation is a huge victory following years of community health studies and organizing efforts by the Post-71 Uranium Workers Committee. The bill still has an uphill battle as it navigates through congressional committees. To help get this bill passed, please call your congressional representatives and ask them to support RECA reform! For more information and to view the results of the community health survey, please visit: www.post71exposure.org.

Although congressmen/women were mostly supportive of finding funding to address the uranium legacy and the need for RECA reform, our message of no new uranium mining had a difficult time finding a receptive ear from Congress. Many in Congress believe we need to "consider all the options" when developing an energy plan. What many of them don't consider are the impacts nuclear energy will have on our New Mexican communities. Throughout the nuclear chain, from uranium mining to issues of radioactive waste, we will be impacted. There are no safe or clean ways to mine uranium. Promises of new technology are false. To go forward with new mining and nuclear power will only exacerbate an already devastating problem in our area. Many of the new proposed mines are either on tribal lands or on lands that hold significant cultural importance. Native American sacred sites such as Mt. Taylor are being threatened by new mining. We conveyed this message to Congress and asked them to respect the cultural beliefs of our communities as we fight to protect the sacred.

Overall, the trip went well and we had some quality visits with Congressional staffers; it felt like they heard our messages and were willing to work with us on several policy pieces. It was also a great learning experience for some of us that had never done federal lobbying before. We are planning more trips to Washington, DC and are continuing to keep the pressure on Congress by making phone calls and sending letters and emails into their offices. ✈

— Nadine Padilla, MASE Coordinator



Nadine Padilla and Linda Evers outside the U.S. Capitol.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Thank You, Matthew Baca

Southwest Research and Information Center thanks Matthew Baca for his help in hosting a benefit book reading and signing at the Lobo Theatre in Albuquerque. Baca did a reading from his first book, *The Antiquarian*, which was published in 2009. It is a fantasy novel featuring two Tewa Indian youth who are sent back in time to 1692 to stop a massacre and bring about peace and religious tolerance in what is now New Mexico.

SRIC would also like to thank the The Lobo Theatre and the Frontier Restaurant for supporting the event.

