

Former Navajo Nation chairman:

'Uranium: That's the danger'



Alma E. Hernandez/Independent

Navajo Nation Council delegates Edmund Yazzie, left, and Daniel Tso, center, and Speaker Seth Damon, right, listen as Percy Anderson speaks during a public hearing on the impacts of uranium Friday at Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint. There are two upcoming uranium public hearings March 13 in Chinle, Arizona, and March 14 in Tuba City, Arizona.

Feds act quickly on coronavirus, but locals ask what about uranium?

By Vida Volkert
Staff writer
eastnavajo@gallupindependent.com

CROWNPOINT – As the federal government acts quickly to allocate \$8.3 billion in federal assistance to support research and development of a vaccine against coronavirus, Peterson Zah wants to remind the public that it has taken decades for the Navajo people to see moneys for uranium cleanup on the reservation and to compensate uranium victims and their families.

"They are so afraid because of the epidemic. We have been dealing with uranium for 80 years – 80 years. There's not a soul here that has not been affected by uranium," Zah, the first Navajo Nation President and the last chairman of the tribe, said at a public hearing on uranium issues held at



Alma E. Hernandez/Independent

Teracita Keyanna, of Red Water Pond Road, speaks to members of the Navajo Nation Council during a public hearing on the impacts of uranium Friday at Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint.

**See Uranium hearing,
Page 5**



Alma E. Hernandez/Independent

Members of the Navajo Nation Council listen to Edith Hood, of Red Water Pond, speak during a public hearing on the impacts of uranium Friday at Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint.

Uranium hearing

Continued from Page 1

Navajo Technical University's Wellness Center Friday. "Uranium: That's the danger, and you need to be aware of that."

Zah noted that it's election year and urged attendants to vote for the candidates that support efforts to clean up the Navajo Nation from uranium waste and to compensate victims of cancer resulting from exposure. He was among a couple dozen speakers who provided verbal testimony about their experiences with uranium on the reservation at the hearing organized by the Navajo Nation Council Friday.

Speakers included community members, survivors, local activists, researchers and tribal officials.

Navajo Nation Council Delegate Charlene Tso shared her personal story and told the audience her paternal grandmother, Rose Willie, suffered for nearly a decade before she died at the age of 76 with a tumor in her throat that was never diagnosed in life.

"We could not understand the swelling on her throat and took her to various hospitals nearby, and they told us it was because of her old age," Tso said.

Years after Willie's death, the family became aware that she might have been exposed to uranium from a mine near her home in the Teec Nos Pos area, and that her home had also been on the path of atmospheric nuclear waste brought by winds from detonations conducted by the United States in Nevada between 1951 and 1962. EPA

records show that the United States conducted nearly 200 atmospheric nuclear weapons development tests from 1945 to 1962.

"We had to hire an investigator because we never got the full autopsy clarification — it just said the cause of death was Alzheimer's," Tso said about her grandmother's death. "And we had to do the un-sacred thing and get her body back out to re-examine it. And it was confirmed that she did have throat cancer, and she had been living with it for about 10 years. My family was mad, of course. It is something that we are never going to let go. To know that she suffered for years and it shouldn't have happened if the proper care was there — the main obligation (the federal government) promised to uphold, health care for Native Americans, that was never fulfilled."

Tso said one of her priorities as delegate for the Navajo Nation is uranium cleanup. She has been meeting with U.S. EPA officials, provided testimony in Washington, and has been coordinating with members of the council as well as the Office of the President and Vice President of the Navajo Nation to strategize policy.

"It needs to be effective, efficient and it needs to be clear," she said. "It will take years to clean the Navajo Nation and the money is not there. We have over 500 mines on the reservation and over 250 mines are unclaimed. How can we find the individuals responsible for that?"



Alma E. Hernandez/Independent

Edith Hood, of Red Water Pond Road, speaks to members of the Navajo Nation Council during a public hearing on the impacts of uranium Friday at Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint.

EPA estimates that from 1944 to 1986, nearly 30 million tons of uranium ore were extracted from Navajo lands under leases with the Navajo Nation. Hundreds of Navajos worked at the mines, often living and raising families in close proximity to the mines and mills.

Working, playing at the mines

Larry J. King — who worked at the United Nuclear Northeast Church Rock Mine as an underground mine surveyor and witnessed the events of the mill tailing spill of July 16, 1979, the largest spill of radioactive material in the United States — turned to activism to stop more contamination or yet another spill on his land. At the hearing at Navajo Technical University Friday, he talked about his

experiences with uranium but was cut short when he ran out of time. Most members of the audience were granted three minutes to share concerns.

King talked about an abandoned mine approximately 1,000 feet from his home in Churchrock which, he said, "has never been remediated." The site, known as Old Church Rock Mine, drops 700 feet to 900 feet below land surface and was operated by Phillips Petroleum between 1960 and 1962, and United Nuclear Northeast between 1977 and 1983, according to King.

"I remember this mine site clearly because as kids growing up there we often played on piles of dirt that I later learned were uranium ore stockpiles waiting to be transported for processing at a mill near Bluewater," he said. "Years later, I witnessed the reopening and operation

of the mine on a daily basis. Uncovered ore-hauling trucks transported ore from the mine to the UNC mill 2.5 miles away on New Mexico Highway 566."

He asked members of the Navajo Nation Council to reaffirm and strengthen the Diné Natural Resources Protection Act, the Navajo Nation's ban on uranium mining and processing that was signed into law in 2005.

While all the uranium mines on the Navajo Nation are closed today, their legacy of uranium contamination remains, not only on site, but at nearby homes and water sources where elevated levels of radiation have been recorded, according to EPA records.

"Potential health effects from this contamination include lung cancer from inhalation of radioactive particles, as well as bone cancer and impaired kidney function from exposure to radionuclides in drinking water," the EPA reports.

The EPA has entered into enforcement agreements and settlements valued at over \$1.7 billion to reduce the highest risks of radiation exposure to the Navajo people, and funds are available to begin the assessment and cleanup process at 219 of the 523 abandoned uranium mines, according to the EPA Website.

The public hearings on uranium will continue when the Naabik'iyáti Committee of the Navajo Nation reconvenes in Chinle, Arizona, March 13 and in Tuba City, Arizona, March 14.