

## **Locals impacted by uranium mining tell their stories**

By Christina Tsosie July 26, 2017

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GALLUP — With more than 535 abandoned uranium mines scattered throughout the Navajo Nation, locals living on the reservation have dealt with the effects of waste piles in their own backyards for decades.

Recent studies have found that Navajo people living near these abandoned uranium waste piles and abandoned mines have higher risks of being diagnosed with various cancers, experiencing pregnancy difficulties and abnormalities, among other health issues. In addition, not only Navajo are affected by these abandoned mines, but their livestock and way of living as well.



Anna Rondon

Anna Rondon, with the McKinley Uranium Coalition, conducted a birth cohort study on pregnant Navajo women living in close proximity to uranium waste piles and abandoned mines.

“This study was requested by the Navajo communities back in the early 2000s, and as a result of that, a study was done in eastern Navajo on uranium exposure and kidney disease on some elders living in the area where mines were,” Rondon said.

Following that study on uranium exposure and kidney disease, research on uranium exposure in birth outcomes on Navajo was conducted.

“We recruited about 1,500 expecting mothers in their second or last trimesters,” she said.

To participate in the birth cohort study, subjects had to have lived near a uranium mine for more than five years throughout their lifetime. Subjects also had to be registered members of the Navajo Nation who received their prenatal services through Indian Health Services hospitals participating in the study.

Both studies were funded by the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center along with the Southwest Research Information Center.

“These two organizations wrote a grant to the Center of Disease Control in 2008 and 2009 and it was funded for three years,” Rondon said.



Teracita Keyanna

Red Water Pond community member Teracita Keyanna was a participant of the birth cohort study during her first pregnancy. Keyanna grew up in the area and is all too aware of the dangers of uranium mining.

“I participated in the study just for the community,” Keyanna said. “My son was born with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.”

The mother of three, Keyanna, said that she currently lives in Gallup because she knows that Red Water Pond Community, where she grew up is dangerous. Keyanna said that there is no signage when it comes to waste piles and abandoned mine shafts.

“My kids could play in an arroyo or ditch and not know that uranium is there in the dirt,” Keyanna said. “I want my kids to grow up in a safe environment and cleaning up these abandoned mines and doing more studies should be a priority.”

The study was finalized in August 2016, and the findings have sent chills throughout local communities.

“Since I left the Navajo Department of Health these results have indicated that there are still high levels of uranium in newborns’ blood and urine,” Rondon said.

The birth cohort study just looks at birth outcomes, however, according to Rondon, more research needs to be done.

“There’s still so much to learn – we need more studies done and to do that, we’re gonna need some help from our local government,” Rondon said. “Studies on what the local vegetation does to livestock – especially the sheep – have not been done.”

Rondon said that sheep that have consumed the vegetation within the area where uranium has been mined, have been known to have their insides tainted a neon yellow.

“We butchered one time and we saw a really neon yellow, almost green cluster underneath the kidneys of this sheep we were planning to cook and eat,” Rondon said. “We just ended up not eating it.”

### **We need help**

Mitchell Capitan, co-founder of the Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining of Crownpoint said that as a former groundwater technician working for the MobilOil Corporation, he developed a negative stand against mining on the Navajo reservation.

“Back in 1994, when MobilOil came into Crownpoint and began their pilot project, they made all kinds of promises saying that in situ leach processing was a responsible and effective way to mine uranium,” Capitan said. “In the end, it didn’t turn out the way they said.”

In situ leaching processing is a method where millions of gallons of carbonated water is pump into the ground to extract uranium. While in situ leaching processing causes little disturbance on the surface, it uses a lot of water and contaminating ground water and aquifers is a possibility.

“With my job experience, I knew that after this process, there was no way water used could ever be restored to its former state,” Capitan said. “Our water here in Crownpoint is precious, pristine and it is limited. There is no way we can afford any mistakes when it comes to environmental disasters – it just can’t happen here.”

This bad legacy of mining has to end sometime, there are other alternatives when it comes to clean energy, he said. When it comes to health and turning a profit, you can’t put a price on good health or the environment.

“I’d rather have good health and one dollar rather than a million dollars and a deteriorating health,” Capitan said. “I’m glad that while I was working, I always took the necessary precautions.”

Others living near uranium waste piles and abandoned uranium mines, however, were not as fortunate.



Edith Hood

Edith Hood, 65, a resident of the Red Water Pond Community, a community that has felt the impact of the Churchrock mine, has been advocating for locals for years. Hood is also a member of the Red Water Pond Community Association.

From 1976-1982, Hood worked in the Churchrock mines for six years as a technician and her job was to read and grade ores that were to be blasted out of the mine.

“I worked very close with the miners for years,” Hood said. “But it wasn’t until I was diagnosed with lymphoma back in 2006, that I woke up.”

According to Hood, while working at the Churchrock mine, no one told the workers that they were being exposed to toxins in the air. Hood said workers used to eat their lunch

down in the mines while workers on the surface would blast uranium ore out of the ground.

Hood's father Jack Hood, who had also worked in the mines, died from pulmonary fibrosis, a condition where the lungs become scarred over time. Possible causes of pulmonary fibrosis have been related to breathing environmental pollutants, including silica and hard metal dusts, bacteria and animal proteins, and gases and fumes according to the American Lung Association. Hood's mother died from cancer as well.

"With our traditional upbringing, we didn't understand what uranium is, as Navajo, we need to see it, touch it, we can't smell it or have any way of knowing that it was in the air," Hood said.

"It makes me wonder how many of the miners died not knowing what was the cause of their illness. And I wonder how our leaders could let this happen to us."

"There are so many people living here, will you not do anything about what's happening to us?" Hood said.