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Tribes Take Uranium Pollution Grievances to Nuke Regulators (1)

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- Navajo Nation wants cleanup of 500 abandoned mines
- Plan moves waste only a short distance from tribal land



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Reporter



Federal nuclear regulators will likely face an outpouring of frustration from environmental justice communities living with the toxic legacy of uranium mining pollution and waste, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said Friday ahead of a public forum in New Mexico.

“There’s going to be some pretty tough speech tonight,” Nez said in an interview. “Our citizens need to get this out of their system—the frustration—to those that can listen and hear and make a difference. Because they’ve been living with all these emotions for decades.”

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s three members are scheduled to meet with members of the Navajo Nation and Spokane Tribe of Indians to discuss federal efforts to clean up uranium pollution in the southwest. They will be joined by representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency and Energy Department and by state officials from the region.

The rare on-site briefing with nuclear commission members comes as the Biden administration attempts to make progress toward cleaning up nuclear waste sites. The Energy Department is also weighing programs that secure uranium fuel supplies for the current fleet of nuclear reactors and next-generation reactors currently under development with billions in taxpayer money.

Updating Policies

The meetings come a week after the commission staff published a [114-page report](#) recommending updates to decades-old environmental justice policies. The suggestions, which must be approved by the commission to take effect, include improving tribal outreach and addressing “confusion and inconsistency” in how environmental justice is defined and applied in project reviews.

The commission will convene a two-hour meeting with people who live near the 125-acre Northeast Church Rock Mine Site in McKinley County, N.M., where a remediation effort is underway to clean up the mine’s operations from 1967 to 1982. The mine was originally licensed to United Nuclear Corp., a defunct company now owned by General Electric Co. and overseeing decommissioning of its former mines.

The commission is considering a proposal endorsed by the EPA to excavate about 1 million cubic yards of mine waste from the mine site and dispose of it at an existing uranium mill site nearby, just off Navajo land. The commission expects a final environmental impact statement next month, with a final decision on the license amendment in June.

Later, the commission will hold a three-hour session at a hotel in Gallup, N.M., to discuss progress in its 10-year plan to address uranium contamination on the Navajo Nation and lessons learned from former uranium mill sites.

“The commission wants to hear first-hand about efforts to remediate uranium contamination on Navajo lands and throughout the West,” David McIntyre, a commission spokesman, said in an email. “This format will allow them to meet face-to-face with members of the communities most affected, as well as their community leaders.”

Political Support

There are over 500 abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation, and 30 million tons of uranium ore were extracted from Navajo lands from 1944 to 1986, according to the EPA. Navajo workers and residents have fallen ill over the years and suffered from the mining operations, Nez said.

The Navajo Nation has pressed for all the federal agencies to work together to remove waste and place it at facilities far from tribal land. Federal officials have said [political gridlock](#) over building a central geologic repository for nuclear waste makes that process challenging.

The currently proposed disposal site is “just a stone’s throw away—that’s unacceptable,” Nez said in the interview. “It needs to go somewhere else further away so that the community can heal and restore balance.”

The Navajo people have a “good friend” in President Joe Biden, who has put more of an emphasis on tribal outreach than prior administrations, said Nez, a Democrat. He has attended multiple White House events and gave an “elevator speech” directly to the president on the tribe’s concerns, including on uranium pollution, he said.

Now, he hopes the political support of the Biden administration will translate meetings into action.

“The Navajo people helped turn the state of Arizona from a red state to the blue state,” Nez said. “I have to continuously remind the White House that we are a very influential voting block—and we also have a lot of needs.”

(Updated with comment from NRC spokesman.)

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