

THE LEADER IN ENERGY & ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY NEWS

17. URANIUM:

EPA announces 'milestone' in Navajo mine cleanup

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U.S. EPA announced plans yesterday for cleaning up the largest abandoned uranium mine on the Navajo Nation in northwest New Mexico.

The plan is part of a multiyear effort to address the legacy of uranium mining, which hit the Navajo Nation hard. Mining for uranium used in nuclear weapons and then power plants contaminated land, water and homes, some of which were built using uranium mining waste.

Cleaning up the Northeast Church Rock Mine, which EPA calls the "highest priority" site on the Navajo Nation, will require the removal of 1.4 million tons of radium- and uranium-contaminated soil. The polluted material will go to a lined, capped facility. The effort is expected to take several years.

"This is an important milestone in the effort to address the toxic legacy of historic uranium mining on the Navajo Nation," Jared Blumenfeld, administrator for EPA's Pacific Southwest Region, said in a statement. "This plan is the result of several years of collaboration between EPA, the Navajo Nation, and the Red Water Pond Road community living near the mine."

The "disposal cell" will be designed with help from the Navajo Nation, the New Mexico Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Department of Energy. EPA predicts eventual unrestricted access to the site.

"A perfect remedy is difficult to design, and in this case every stakeholder can be proud of their input into the remedy," Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly said in a statement. "I look forward to the cleanup and putting people to work restoring our lands."

The Northeast Church Rock Mine operated between 1967 and 1982, around the time the market for uranium dropped. EPA estimates that roughly 4 million tons of uranium ore were extracted from Navajo lands between 1944 and 1986.

"It's been one huge mistake after another," Chris Shuey, uranium impact chief at the Southwest Research and Information Center, said in an interview.

Now environmental advocates like Shuey are trying to stop new uranium mining efforts in the same area. Earlier this year, the Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining filed a complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to stop new uranium extraction near Crownpoint and Church Rock, N.M. (*E&ENews PM*, July 18).

Groups are also fighting the renewal for a standby permit for Rio Grande Resources Corp.'s Mount Taylor mine, in an area considered sacred by many American Indians in northwest New Mexico (*Land Letter*, Aug. 18). It is also said to hold the nation's largest uranium deposit.

Elsewhere, the Bureau of Land Management announced last month that it is conducting an environmental impact statement into Titan Uranium Inc.'s Sheep Mountain Mine in Fremont County, Wyo. If restarted, the mine could produce more than 1 million pounds of uranium per year, the company said.

And in Colorado, Energy Fuels Inc. is touting a key water rights agreement with opponents that will make way for the first new U.S. conventional uranium mill in decades. Environmentalists are vowing to fight other permits in court and lobby EPA against a key approval needed for a waste dump.