



Representative O'Halleran, Navajo Nation EPA and Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr. discuss uranium and Claim 28 issues

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 31, 2021



PHOTO: Congressman Tom O'Halleran, D-AZ, Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr., Navajo Nation Superfund Program supervisor Dariel Yazzie and members of the Blue Gap/Tachee community met at the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency on Mar. 31 to discuss Congressional uranium cleanup efforts.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Congressman Tom O'Halleran, D-AZ, met with Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency (NNEPA) staff and Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Blue Gap/Tachee, Tselani/Cottonwood) on Wednesday to discuss abandoned uranium mines (AUMs) and cleanup efforts on the Navajo Nation.

“The communities of Blue Gap/Tachee are just a few of the many Navajo communities that need the federal government’s resources to cleanup these lethal abandoned uranium mines,” said Begay, a member of the Resources and Development Committee (RDC) of the Navajo Nation Council. He spoke in support of building the NNEPA’s capacity to handle the cleanup and remediation work as a measure to improve the pace of AUMs that are addressed by federal government. “I believe the Navajo Nation is capable. How we get there will take time and effort.”

The NNEPA is a tribal program that utilizes, in part, federal self-determination contract funds through the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). The Navajo Nation is situated within the USEPA’s Region 9 administrative area along with a total 148 other tribal nations and the states of California, Arizona, Nevada and Hawai’i.

NNEPA staff delivered recommendations to Rep. O'Halleran that included an expansion of the federal self-determination contracts the Navajo Nation uses to fund the NNEPA. That would encourage more local stakeholder engagement and provide opportunities for Navajo businesses and professionals to be utilized for remediation activities.

"I can't share my personal perspective, but I can't share my mother's and my grandmother's," said Dariel Yazzie, environmental program supervisor at the Navajo Nation Superfund Program (NNSP). "Every single one of my staff is connected to the uranium issue on a personal level."

O'Halleran, a member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, expressed his dismay at the pace the federal government has acknowledged and supported the uranium cleanup process on the Navajo Nation.

The remediation of AUMs are typically funded through a process of identifying potentially responsible parties comprised of private entities or their successors. However, for sites that have no party that can be identified, the Navajo Nation has advocated for Congressional action to meet the additional funding needs to cleanup remaining AUMs.

Seraphina Nez, who lives with her family near the Claim 28 AUM site, shared details of having to live near the unaddressed mine sites. "My daughters are afraid to have children. They're afraid they will lose them to Navajo neuropathy. We know mining took place there."

Nez said families and relatives in the area have continually tried to advocate for clean up of additional mine sites that have not been acknowledged in any significant way. "What is the federal government waiting for? Is it for our people to go extinct?" said Nez.

Regarding the Claim 28 site, O'Halleran further acknowledged the state of the capping mechanism found at the current site. He also spoke about his experience in visiting the Tachee/Blue Gap community in 2019.

"It needs to be a superfund site," said O'Halleran. With the Biden-Harris Administration, O'Halleran said he hopes to work with Interior Secretary Debra Haaland to elevate the abandoned uranium mine issues across the Navajo Nation.

"What if this site, or one site, was in Central Park in New York?" said O'Halleran, saying the federal government would immediately clean up the contaminated site. "It's 80 years of irresponsibility and lack of respect to the Navajo Nation."

AUMs on the Navajo Nation are attributed to the history of nuclear development supported by the US Government throughout the 20th Century. Many Navajo people were recruited in the effort to mine, transport and refine uranium without full knowledge of the health effects from exposure to harmful radiation.

O'Halleran said he will continue efforts to establish a date for a Congressional hearing in the area regarding uranium mine issues. He said the responsibility for the federal government to uphold its commitment to tribal nations needs to be enforced.

###

MEDIA CONTACTS

Byron C. Shorty, Communications Director, bcshorty@navajo-nns.gov, (928) 287-2085

Timothy E. Benally, Public Information Officer, timothybenally@navajo-nns.gov, (928) 380-6121