



Navajo Nation Washington Office

Email: info@nnwo.org

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Uranium Mining's Legacy: A Tale of Neglected Heroes

By Justin C. Ahasteen, Executive Director of the Navajo Nation Washington Office

The history of uranium mining in the United States is a tale woven with threads of technological progress, economic prosperity, and the stark realities of human and environmental exploitation. The story is particularly poignant for the Navajo people, whose land and lives were disproportionately affected by the uranium mining boom. From the 1940s through the 1970s, in the shadow of the Cold War, uranium mining surged in the United States to meet the demand for nuclear weapons and power. The Navajo Nation, with its uranium-rich lands, was the epicenter of this boom. Thousands of Navajo men and women were employed in the mines, many proud to contribute to nationwide efforts and defense.

However, these miners and their families were never fully informed about the hazards of radiation exposure. In the unventilated, dusty confines of the mines, they inhaled radon gas and radioactive dust. They drank contaminated water from the mines, unknowingly poisoning themselves with every sip. After a hard day's work, miners returned home covered in uranium dust, unwittingly exposing their families to radiation.

The fallout from this uranium boom was catastrophic. The Navajo people have borne the brunt of the health and environmental consequences, with increased rates of lung cancer, kidney disease, and birth defects. Yet, for decades the federal government denied any responsibility for the health crises that grew out of uranium mining.

The Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) Amendments were a belated acknowledgement of the tremendous sacrifice made by these miners and their families. RECA, established in 1990, offered compensation to miners who developed illnesses related to uranium mining and milling. However, these amendments only covered workers and communities impacted before 1971, leaving out thousands affected after this arbitrary cutoff date. The RECA Amendments would have fixed this by expanding eligibility to post-1971 uranium workers.

The decision by Congress to remove these amendments from the National Defense Authorization Act is a disheartening development. It's a slap in the face to the post-1971 uranium workers, particularly the Navajo people, who have, despite everything, remained proudly patriotic. The Navajo Code Talkers of World War II are a prime example of this patriotism, their unique contribution to the war effort demonstrating the enduring commitment of the Navajo people to the United States.

The decision not to reauthorize the RECA Amendments is a blatant act of injustice. It not only dismisses the sacrifices made by the Navajo people and other uranium workers, but also perpetuates the cycles of neglect and exploitation that have characterized the history of uranium mining in the United States. The conditions these miners worked under were already unconscionable; to deny them and their descendants' compensation for the resulting health issues is beyond morally indefensible.

It's time for Congress to rectify this failing. The Navajo people, like all uranium workers, deserve recognition for their contributions and fair compensation for their suffering. The federal government owes it to them to extend and expand the RECA program, offering aid to all affected by the uranium industry's hazardous legacy. A special thanks is warranted to Congressman Eli Crane, Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernández, Senator Josh Hawley, Senator Ben Ray Luján, and Senator Mike Crapo for their leadership in driving these amendments forward.

As a society, we must learn from the past and strive for better. The history of uranium mining teaches us the cost of progress when it is pursued without regard for human life and the environment. Let us honor the sacrifices of the Navajo people and other uranium miners by ensuring their struggles are not forgotten - and by making certain such exploitation never happens again.