

DR. JOE SHIRLEY, JR.
Navajo Nation President

MR. BEN SHELLY
Navajo Nation Vice President



SHARON CLAHCHISCHILLIAGE
Executive Director

NAVAJO NATION WASHINGTON OFFICE

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CONTACT

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Deswood Tome
202-682-7390 or 202-607-5507 (wireless)

Navajo Resources Chairman George Arthur and Navajo EPA Director Stephen Etsitty Testify Before House Committee on Uranium

WASHINGTON, D.C.—The chairman of Navajo Nation Council Resources Committee testified today before congress on the long term effects of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation.

George Arthur told the House Committee on Government Reform yesterday that Navajo people are no longer subject of an ongoing energy experiment.

“We are still undergoing what appears to be a never-ending federal experiment to see how much devastation can be endured by a people and a society from exposure to radiation in the air, in the water, in mines, and on the surface of the land,” said Arthur. “We are unwilling to be the subjects of that ongoing experiment any longer.”

Arthur drew attention to the largest spill of contaminated material in the United States that occurred in Church Rock, New Mexico where some 94 million gallons of radioactive sludge was released into a natural wash along I-40 interstate highway of New Mexico and Arizona.

Arthur was joined in presenting testimony by Navajo Environmental Protection Agency Executive Director Stephen Etsitty, who defined the location of uranium sites on the Navajo Nation.

“The legacy of past uranium mining and processing blankets the Navajo Nation from the eastern agency communities of Smith Lake and Ambrosia Lake, to Church Rock, near Gallup, on up to the northern region near the four corners area of Shiprock, Cove, and the Chuska mountains to my home area of Lukachukai,” said Etsitty. Other Navajo communities effected include Tuba City and Cameron near the Grand Canyon.

Etsitty testified that decommissioned uranium mining sites with radioactive mill tailings were capped with clay and rock causing the hazardous material to contaminate the groundwater. “We know there is radioactive and chemical groundwater contamination under all



of these sites and that in Tuba City and Shiprock the contamination is moving toward municipal drinking water wells,” said Etsitty.

Rep. Tom Udall, D-NM-3, was invited to sit on the panel of House members where he presented questions to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. “If one agency would have stood up and said that we would have prevented all that,” said Udall, referring to neglectful mining practices that occurred on the Navajo Nation.

House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Henry A. Waxman, D-CA-30, opened the hearing with a riveting statement. “It’s a modern American tragedy,” he said. “For decades the Navajo Nation has been dealing with the deadly consequences of radioactive pollution from uranium mining and milling. It statement included accounts of Navajo children swimming in open pit uranium mines in the 1990s where radium levels were more than 270 times beyond U.S. EPA standards. “American citizens are still drinking contaminated water, breathing in radioactive dust, and likely living in radio homes—today. That’s happening today, right now,” said Waxman.

Phil Harrison, council delegate of Red Valley and Cove, a long time advocate for uranium miners and affected families testified of his own personal encounter of growing up in a uranium mining area. “I grew up in uranium mining camps,” said Harrison. “I drank uranium contaminated water from those mines. We washed our clothes in uranium contaminated water. I watched children going into the mines and playing on the waste piles. We made our coffee with the uranium contaminated water,” he said.

Other Navajo witnesses included Edith Hood, Ray Manygoats, and Larry King. Witnesses for the federal government included Wayne Nastri, EPA regional administrator, David Geiser, U.S. Department of Energy, Charles Miller, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and Robert McSwain, director for the Indian Health Services.

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