

Friday, April 20, 2012

Washington, D.C. – In letters to the Department of Energy (DOE), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Indian Health Services (IHS), New Mexico Congressmen Ben Ray Luján and Martin Heinrich joined five other House Democrats to call for urgent action to clean up hundreds of abandoned uranium mines that pose extreme public health risks to residents of the Navajo Nation.

Reps. Luján and Heinrich, Natural Resources Committee Ranking Member Ed Markey of Massachusetts, Reps. Ed Pastor and Raul Grijalva of Arizona, Rep. Jared Polis of Colorado, and Rep. Dale Kildee of Michigan sent letters to Energy Secretary Steven Chu, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, and IHS Director Yvette Roubideaux.

“As Democratic members concerned with environmental protection of Native American communities, we are deeply troubled by the federal government’s failure and such failure’s impact on the health and safety of Navajo Nation citizens,” the Congressmen wrote.

“As the trustee-delegates to the Navajo Nation, whose future generations are being exposed to extremely radioactive sites due to federal neglect, you should agree that urgent action must be taken to address this ongoing problem,” they continued.

The letter to EPA and DOE can be found [here](#). The letter to IHS can be found [here](#).

Mines built to supply uranium for the federal government’s nuclear weapons program have sat dormant for decades, exposing Navajo Nation residents to life-threatening radioactivity. Uranium mining and milling releases a number of cancer-causing elements including uranium, thorium, radium, polonium, and radon.

While the EPA and DOE have identified the problem and set up a multi-agency task force to properly remediate the mines, a recent New York Times article highlighted how those efforts are

falling short in Cameron, Arizona, and other parts of the Navajo Nation.

The article reports that two days of exposure at the Cameron site exceeds annual radiation limits set out by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. It also quotes a DOE official saying that his agency could work better with the EPA, raising concerns about the program's effectiveness.

"The connection between human exposure to high levels of radioactivity, like those found at the Cameron site, and development of serious and life-threatening health problems is undeniable," the Congressmen added.

"Lack of funding or intra-agency politics are poor excuses for the federal government's failure to remediate abandoned mines within the Navajo Nation's territory, particularly when these mines pose a real and immediate health threat."

The EPA has identified 4,000 uranium mines nationwide. Abandoned uranium mines are found in 14 western states, and 75 percent are on federal or tribal land. While there is no federal estimate for the total cost of remediation for these sites, a federal study in 2000 found that cleaning up 54 abandoned uranium mines would cost nearly \$2.3 billion.

# # #