

GUEST

SPEAKER:

Good morning. As you know, this past July our National Council overturn legislation made in December that would have allowed Uranium Resources Incorporated to start mining near Church Rock. This is the same Church Rock that was the site of the largest release of radioactive material in US history, even larger than the Three Mile Island accident but with much less media coverage. Over 1,000 tons of radioactive waste and 93 millions of gallons of radioactive waste water were dumped into the Puerco River that day in 1979.

For those of you that remember, the warnings came late and in English only. So our people went on with business as usual. Many of our relatives suffered for it. To this day the government has not measured the health effects of the spill.

Now, within 35 years of the Church Rock spill, there are members of our community that are willing to open up our lives to mining again. Thankfully, the council's ruling has held off URI and others. But these mining companies were waiting with bated breath for any opportunity to mine on our lands. The voices demanding access to domestic sources of energy are growing. We need to prepare our community for inevitable discussions about uranium mining.

I'm not here today to argue whether or not we should allow mining. I know a lot of you want the economic growth and the jobs. I'm here instead to outline a strategy for integrating our voices into state and federal policy making and to highlight the challenges that we face. So I'll start first with the challenges.

Integrating our knowledge into the broader discourse will be an uphill battle. First, we face major disadvantages compared to the mining companies. We don't have an organized constituency. We can't compete with them in terms of resources. And we don't have the influence that they have over politicians.

Second, many will dismiss us for not being scientific and will try to argue that we're motivated by our own interests and, therefore, not impartial. Third, the scientific data isn't clearly on our side yet. The scientific community has shown that uranium has made our community sick. But there hasn't been enough money or time spent on how it's made us sick.

So why is that important for us to be able to clearly share our narrative about these health impacts with the government and broader public? And why is it important that we ourselves understand the full extent of these impacts? Because the government and corporations have failed us. Not just failed us, they've dismissed and rejected us.

So moving forward, what is our strategy? First, we will develop a task force that will be in charge of mobilizing community members and spearheading an outreach program to let our community know about the efforts to reduce local knowledge about the health impacts of the uranium mining. Second, reach out to the scientific community for local partners. Several institutions such as the University of New Mexico and Southwest Research and Information Center have expressed interest in health data. The task force can work to get these scientists from different institutions to partner with us on this.

Third, facilitate the conversation around the type of data we should collect with members of the scientific community and our own community. Fourth, train researchers within our community to conduct face-to-face interviews in English and Navajo. Make phone calls, organize public forums to collect data about community health. And the data can then be validated through random sampling to ensure validity.

Fifth, pair community researchers with members of the scientific community to analyze and interpret findings in a language that can be understood within the scientific community but also within our own community. And then hold public meetings around this information to facilitate discussion about the health effects of uranium mining as well as the impacts of the remaining remnants of mining.

Finally, the task force should pair with members of the scientific community to release findings to local media, environmental organizations, and to the broader public. Our strategy then is to ensure that our community is knowledgeable about the impacts of uranium mining so that we can understand the full impact of opening our lands up again and to be able to translate what we have suffered in our own language and technical language necessary to make people sit up and take notice of us.

So I'll leave you with these numbers; 29, 521, and 30. A 2000 study showed that Navajo uranium miners are 29 times more likely than Navajos that are not involved in mining to develop lung cancer. There are now 521 abandoned mines across the Navajo Nation. Although the federal government is taking the lead to clean up after these mines, it will take billions of dollars and hundreds of years. It's time that we just don't have.

And the mining has left scars on our water and our land that you can now estimate that 30% of our people don't have access to uncontaminated water. The EPA has been a valuable partner in cleaning up old mines but there's still much to do-- sorry, but there's still much to do in protecting ourselves. So we must convince the government that they cannot stand by and watch as waste from the mining continues to seep into our water, land, and our bodies.