

# Nuclear Power and Uranium Mining = Racism

By Bonnie Urfer and John Heid

The Rio Puerco flows along the southern boundary of the Navajo reservation, which spans the New Mexico-Arizona border. On July 16, 1979, eleven hundred tons of radioactive mill waste and ninety million gallons of contaminated liquid washed down the dry river bed. Every well for 50 miles downstream was contaminated. The water in one of every four wells on Navajo land is now radioactive. Native Americans lived in at least 70 houses made with radioactive materials. This is part and parcel of a history and policy of destroying Indian lands and lives.

For over a half century, uranium mining for the nuclear weapons and power industries has contaminated homes, schools, playgrounds and food on tribal land. In some cases the mining companies provided radioactive dirt for constructing buildings.

Between 1945 and 1988 thirteen million tons of uranium ore were taken from Navajo lands and used in nuclear weapons production. More than 15,000 people worked in the mines and mills of the southwest alone. Lung disease has claimed the lives of 400 Navajo miners formerly employed in the 1,100 uranium mines on tribal lands in the Four Corners. At the end of the arms race, 1,000 mines and four processing mills shut down on tribal lands.

Uranium miners were never warned of the dangers inherent in their jobs. They walked in radioactive mud, drank water running in the mine and contaminated their families by bringing radioactive dust home on their clothes. During the Cold War, miners often worked around the clock.

Eighty nine abandoned open-pit uranium mines in the northwestern South Dakota Cave Hills area are currently managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Studies by the Forest Service show that one mine alone has 1400 millirems (mR) per hour of exposed radiation, a level that is 120,000 times higher than normal background readings of 100 mR year. There are no warning signs posted for the general public anywhere near this site. Water from the abandoned uranium mines at Cave Hills empties into the Grand River which flows directly through the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Residents from three villages that are located on the Grand River use this flowage for drinking.

Water runoff from the Slim Buttes abandoned uranium mine empties into the Moreau River which flows through the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation. Four villages are located on the Moreau River. Both the Moreau and the Grand Rivers empty into the Missouri River which empties into the Mississippi River. Only after the public raised concern about these mines did the USFS and the Environmental Protection Agency pay for a single study at one mine.

The southern Black Hills also contain many abandoned uranium mines. Nuclear radiation near Edgemont, South Dakota has polluted the underground water of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation according to a study completed in 1980 by Women of All Red Nations. In 1972 President Richard Nixon signed an executive order for the four state region to be a "National Sacrifice Area" for the mining and production of uranium.

Thirty years of uranium mining at Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico have resulted in elevated cancer rates, miscarriages, deformities, developmental disabilities, asthma, allergies and bronchitis within the Laguna community. High concentrations of uranium arsenic and other heavy metals have been found in one out of five drinking-water sources. Across the reservation sandy mill tailings and chunks of ore squared off by blasting were left unattended at old mines and mills, free for the taking. They were fashioned into bread ovens, cisterns, foundations, fireplaces, floors and walls.

Between 1984 and 1995, the Department of Energy (DOE) focused on the contamination problem on Indian land. The agency spent \$240 million to cover tailing piles at old uranium mills. Today, however, radioactive debris is scattered around these largely unattended mine sites. Surface caps have been eroded by weather. Runoff from seasonal rains washes through the abandoned mines. Children play in the tailings piles. Native people and their livestock continue to inhale radioactive dust borne aloft by desert winds.

In 1990 Congress apologized to native miners and gave compensation of \$150,000 to qualified workers. The compensation law for uranium miners applies to workers in only five states: Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico. The compensation period covers January 1, 1947 to December 31, 1971. In order to be eligible for the maximum \$150,000, miners or their heirs must have compiled medical documentation of the miner contracting lung cancer or certain non-malignant respiratory diseases after having been exposed to 200 or more working level months (WLM) of radiation. A WLM is a defined measurement of worker exposure to alpha radiation from airborne radon daughters. These are radioactive decay products of uranium. 200 WLMs represents very high exposure. In 1972 Federal mine safety regulations limited worker exposure to 4 WLMs per year based on the reasoning that over a career of thirty years a miner would be limited to an exposure of 120 working level months. So, to be eligible for compensation the early miners must have been exposed to considerably more radiation than current miners are allowed to receive in their entire lifetimes in the mines. A miner could reach the 200 WLM in four to six years. In some instances with intense exposure, the compensation level could be inhaled in one year. Only about 500 out of 3,000 Navajo miners who registered for payments were granted compensation.

Uranium prices have increased to more than \$60 per pound up from \$7 per pound just six years ago. Skulking mining companies are once again plaguing Navajo communities across a 27,000 square mile area of Arizona, New Mexico and

Utah. The Black Hills are also being targeted by the mining industry. People in South Dakota are trying to prevent the drilling of 155 new uranium holes in the Black Hills. Mineral rights, claims and applications for permits are in the works in multiple states. A Texas-based company, Hydro Resources, Inc. holds a Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) license to mine in and around Crownpoint, a crossroads town of 3,000 Navajos that sits on the largest known undeveloped uranium deposit in the U.S. Church Rock, New Mexico is targeted for mining to begin in 2008. The two locations could potentially produce 42 million pounds of uranium and \$2.5 billion for the mining companies.

Mining companies extend every assurance that their new and improved “in-situ” techniques will not create the same kind of on-going environmental poisoning, damage and deadly contamination as still exists from past extraction, but six years of pumping were required to return water in one Wyoming in-situ leach mine to the state’s safe drinking water standards. Uranium Resources, Inc. (URI) has not been as successful at a mine site south of Corpus Christi, Texas.

On April 29, 2005 Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., signed into tribal law the Diné Natural Resources Protection Act (DNRPA) of 2005, outlawing uranium mining on or near Navajo land. The act states, “No person shall engage in uranium mining and processing on any sites within Navajo Indian Country.” Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining — Concerned Citizens of T’iistsooz-Nideeshgizh (ENDAUM-CCT) is working to stop proposed mines through community education, interaction with Navajo Nation leaders, and a seven-year-long legal challenge of the mines’ federal license. A URI company license application has been appealed by the tribe. Tribal members have visited representatives in Washington and at the United Nations and citizens have marched in opposition to proposed mining. The work of the Southwest Research and Information Center (SRIC), ENDAUM-CCT and their law firms — the New Mexico Environmental Law Center (NMELC) and the Harmon-Curran firm in Washington, D.C. — have erected major roadblocks to the proposed mining, but the license has not been terminated.

On March 30, 1992 the Havasupai lost an important legal battle when the Supreme Court refused to hear their appeal of a court decision that allowed Energy Fuels Nuclear (EFN) to open Canyon Mines, located 8 miles from the Grand Canyon’s south entrance. Energy Fuels Nuclear Canyon Mine shaft is built over the natural springs that feed Havasu Creek, the only source of water for the Havasu’uw Baa’ja People. The Havasupai wrestled with the federal government and the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality over the issuance of a water quality permit for the mine. They challenged the Environmental Impact Statement prepared by the U.S. Forest Service fearing that surface and ground water and a major aquifer would be contaminated. Although EFN plans to install a monitoring wall, the Havasupai contend that detecting contamination after it has reached the water will be too late.

The Ute Tribe in Utah won a victory when the DOE refused to allow the dumping of 2.6 million cubic yards of uranium tailings up hill from reservation land at White Mesa. Cedar Mesa and White Mesa are known for their superb archaeological treasures. The uranium dirt would have been shipped to the Energy Fuels Ltd. site via 110,000 truck loads over three years.

The Indigenous Uranium Forum (IUF), founded by native peoples including Australian Aborigines and North Americans, held the First Global Radiation Victims Conference in New York City in 1987. Five years later, on September 19, 1992, indigenous peoples from around the world issued a global ban on uranium mining on native lands.

The Indigenous World Uranium Summit held November 30-December 2, 2006 on the Navajo Nation in Window Rock, Arizona brought together Australian aborigines and villagers from India, Africa and Pacific Islanders as well as indigenous peoples of North America. A declaration to take action to halt the cancer, birth defects and deaths from uranium mining and nuclear industries on native lands was signed. The summit concluded with the following recommendations:

1. No more exploitation of lands and people by uranium mining, nuclear-power generation, nuclear testing, and radioactive waste dumping.
2. Clean up and restore all homelands.
3. End the secrecy and fully disclose all information about nuclear industry and its dangers.
4. Provide full and fair compensation for damage to peoples, families, and communities, cultures and economies, homelands, water, air and all living things.