



I Environment

Navajo Nation Abandoned Uranium Mines Cleanup Gets \$600 Million



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A historic, \$600 million settlement agreement reached by the Navajo Nation, the United States and two subsidiaries of the mining company Freeport-McMoRan aims to address a legacy of uranium mining that stretches back to 1944. The settlement, announced by the U.S. Department of Justice, calls for Cyprus Amax Minerals Co. and Western Nuclear Inc. to clean up 94 abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation. The United States will contribute about half the cost.

The mines are located in four of the six abandoned uranium mine regions on the Navajo Nation, according to DOJ spokesman Wyn Hornbuckle. The largest concentration of abandoned uranium mines is in the Four Corners area, or Tse Tah, Red Valley and Cove, Ariz., and Monument Valley.

"This remarkable settlement will result in significant environmental restoration on Navajo lands and will help build a healthier future for the Navajo people," Assistant Attorney General John C. Cruden, for the Justice Department's Natural Resources Division, said in a statement. "The Justice Department is always ready to work cooperatively with the Navajo Nation and responsible private parties to address the legacy of uranium mining on Navajo lands."

According to data from the Navajo Nation, a total of 523 abandoned uranium mines exist on the 27,000-square-mile reservation. With this settlement, cleanup efforts are taking place at about 200 of them.

"We appreciate the efforts of mining companies like Freeport that are coming forth to clean up the uranium contamination that they have caused on the Navajo Nation," Navajo President Russell Begaye said in a statement. "The Navajo Nation will work very closely with Freeport to make sure that the cleanup is done properly."

The settlement, outlined in a proposed consent decree and filed in federal court in Phoenix, resolves claims of the Navajo Nation against the two mining subsidiaries and against the United States.

According to the settlement, Cyprus Amax and Western Nuclear agree to perform site evaluations, cost analyses and clean up the 94 abandoned uranium mines. In exchange, the United States—on behalf of the Energy and Interior departments—agrees to place \$335 million into a trust account to help fund the cleanup.

The settlement—one of two reached in the past three years—addresses mining operations that started with the high demand of atomic weapons at the end of World War II. Private entities swarmed to the uranium-rich Navajo Nation, where they extracted about 30 million tons of uranium ore between 1944 and 1986, when the last uranium mine shut down.

The federal government, through the Atomic Energy Commission, was the sole purchaser of uranium until commercial sales began in 1966. The AEC continued to purchase ore until 1970.

Yet it has taken the government and mining companies nearly five decades to resolve the longstanding health and environmental issues caused by uranium. Many Navajo people worked in or near the mines, often raising their families in close proximity to radioactive substances.

Since 2008, federal agencies have invested \$130 million to address this uranium legacy, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said in a statement. Agencies including the EPA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Interior and Energy departments, the Indian Health Service and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission have collaborated to tackle contamination on Navajo lands.

The EPA also has compiled a list of 46 "priority mines" for cleanup, and generated more than 100 jobs for Navajo employees. The latest settlement includes 10 priority mines and is expected to create more jobs on the reservation.

The work is subject to oversight from the U.S. EPA in collaboration with the Navajo Nation EPA.

"It is important that Freeport uses Navajo employees and that they contract with Navajo businesses," Begaye said.



Comments

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