

Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment: Grassroots Unite to Address Uranium Impacts

Communities linked by contamination from past uranium mining and processing and by a vision of sustainable development built around the use of renewable energy sources have emerged as significant players in local and regional policy arenas since forming a new grassroots coalition earlier this year.

The most significant victory for groups affiliated with the Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment (MASE) came in the form of commitments made by two state legislative committees to ask Congress to authorize an abandoned uranium mine reclamation program and appropriate funds for clean up of nuclear weapons-era uranium mines, and to pursue separate state funding for regional hydrologic investigations and public health studies in uranium-impacted communities.

Since its inception in January, MASE has been instrumental in raising awareness among policy makers and the public on the urgent needs of communities still faced with impacts of the "Uranium Legacy" that are now 30, 40, and even 50 years old. MASE organized tours of uranium-impacted communities for state political leaders, testified at state legislative hearings on legacy issues, and developed technical support for regional studies on groundwater pollution in uranium mining areas. MASE also sponsored an educational forum on industry's overblown projections of an economic bonanza from new uranium mining, and helped organize public comments on the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC) controversial draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) on uranium *in situ* leach (ISL) mining at three hearings in New Mexico in early September.

CORE GROUPS

Five grassroots groups — Bluewater Valley Downstream Alliance (BVDA), Dineh Bidziil Coalition (DBC), Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining (ENDAUM), Laguna-Acoma Coalition for a Safe Environment (LACSE), and Post-71 Uranium Workers Committee (Post-71) — make up the core of MASE. Supported by three nongovernmental organizations —

the New Mexico Environmental Law Center (NMELC), Sierra Club Environmental Justice Office (SCEJO), and Southwest Research and Information Center (SRIC) — MASE also includes grassroots groups from other uranium-impacted communities in northwestern New Mexico, church-based and environmental justice organizations, and local health and environmental advocacy groups. Brief descriptions of the five core groups and a list of other organizations affiliated with MASE are given in the accompanying box on page 5.



Al Waconda with the Laguna Acoma Coalition for a Safe Environment talks to students from Colorado College about the Jackpile Uranium Mine.



Left to right: Governor John Antonio, Pueblo of Laguna; Gerald Brown, Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining (ENDAUM); New Mexico Lt. Governor Diane Denish; and Larry King, ENDAUM, Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium, tour mining-impacted communities in the Grants Uranium Belt.

Supported by a planning grant from the Norman Foundation, grassroots groups and NGOs came together in January to identify and act on common interests and concerns. Over the next four months, the group drafted a vision statement and mission statement (see box on left), and agreed to collaborate on specific educational and policy actions. Highlights of these actions include:

LEGISLATIVE COMMITMENT TO ADDRESS URANIUM LEGACY

For several years, residents of communities impacted by abandoned uranium mines (AUMs) have been educating decision makers about the environmental and health risks they face. This process seems to have made a difference with some members of the New Mexico Legislature. Two committees — the Indian Affairs Committee and Radioactive and Hazardous Materials Committee — decided to pursue a multi-pronged policy strategy to address legacy concerns following two days of hearings in early October. The committees passed motions to direct legislative staffers to:

- Prepare and send a letter to the New Mexico congressional delegation requesting changes in federal laws and appropriations to assess and reclaim AUMs that provided uranium to the government's nuclear weapons program from the 1940s through 1971.

- Draft a memorial to be introduced in the 2009 session of the Legislature in January establishing the need for more direct federal involvement in the AUM issue, particularly by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE).
- Prepare and introduce legislation to appropriate an as-yet unspecified amount of state funds to (1) conduct a comprehensive hydrologic and water quality assessment of the Ambrosia Lake-Milan uranium mining district, and (2) support ongoing and new health studies among residents of uranium-impacted communities.
- Prepare and introduce legislation to create a Uranium Legacy Clean-up Fund from a tax on newly produced uranium.

With the exception of the last action, representatives of MASE groups testified in support of these initiatives at legislative hearings in August and October. Candace Head-Dylla, a Milan resident and BVDA member, and Laura Watchempino, director of the Haaku Water Office of the Pueblo of Acoma, testified about the ongoing impacts of Homestake Mining Company's uranium mill tailings on local and regional groundwater quality at a hearing of the Economic and Rural Development Committee on August 7 in Gallup. (See accompanying articles on pages 6–8.) Ms. Head-Dylla, on behalf of BVDA and MASE, recommended a regional hydrologic and water quality assessment to determine what can be done to restore the

1.2 million acre-feet of groundwater that BVDA estimates has been contaminated by historic uranium mining and milling discharges since the late-1950s. (This amount equals about 20 to 25 years of water supply for the Albuquerque area at current usage rates.)

Representatives of MASE groups said they still oppose funding legacy clean up with funds from new mining, at least not without a review of the adequacy of existing laws and regulations to prevent new pollution and waste generation. They also noted that such a fund would generate no new revenues for at least the next five years, if not longer, because that is how long it will take for any new mining to be permitted, constructed, and begin operations.

MASE groups also requested that the Legislature ensure that state agencies responsible for implementing mining regulations have enough staff and legal resources to enforce reclamation requirements against financially viable companies that walked away from their operations. And they offered technical evidence to caution legislators about embracing *in situ* leach uranium mining, especially in drinking water aquifers.

HOMESTAKE'S FAILED GROUNDWATER REMEDIATION

MASE lent support to BVDA's efforts to draw attention to 30 years of failed attempts by Homestake (now a subsidiary of the mining giant, Barrick Gold) to remediate groundwater contamination in at least four aquifers under and down-gradient from its uranium mill tailings pile seven miles north of Milan, N.M. MASE sent a letter to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission in late July, urging NRC to hold off on approving an amendment to Homestake's mill license to authorize construction of what BVDA and MASE call an "undersized" new evaporation pond that will not speed up groundwater restoration. SRIC and NMELC staffers, in collaboration with BVDA members, prepared a technical memorandum reviewing the history of Homestake's remediation attempts, noting that NRC should hold off approval of

Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment (MASE)

VISION STATEMENT

MASE envisions a sacred, respectful, peaceful community enjoying a healthy environment.

MISSION STATEMENT

MASE works to restore and protect the natural and cultural environment for the benefit of ourselves and all creatures that live in this beautiful land, and for those who will come after us, by:

- Developing and strengthening the relationships among the people of this community and region
- Understanding the complex and rich ecosystem that sustains and includes us
- Initiating and supporting sustainable ways of working and living that promote health and well-being among the people and the environment
- Engaging with government and industry to remediate and stop harm to our peoples and to our environment.

the new evaporation pond to give USEPA time to conduct a planned “optimization” study of groundwater restoration at HMC tailings and to allow the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) to implement an expanded water quality study in the Ambrosia Lake region. NMED’s study is designed to take a wider look at 50 years of water quality impacts from mine water discharges from more than 60 underground uranium mines and seepage from unlined tailings piles at three “active” uranium mills that have been closed for more than 20 years.

New Mexico Senator Jeff Bingaman asked NRC chairman Dale Klein to carefully consider MASE’s and BVDA’s arguments in an August 8 letter. Klein responded that the NRC staff issued the license amendment for HMC’s new evaporation pond the day before, and recommended that the community look elsewhere for relief from the effects of historic mining discharges because those impacts are outside of NRC’s statutory authorities. In September, Bingaman sent a letter to USEPA supporting BVDA’s call for expanding the current Superfund designation for the Homestake tailing site to include the entire Ambrosia Lake-to-Milan region. As of early October, EPA’s Region VI office in Dallas had not responded to the request.

CONDUCTING COMMUNITY MINING TOURS

MASE sponsored tours of mining-impacted communities in the Grants Mineral Belt for New Mexico Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish and other decision makers. In May, Denish visited abandoned uranium mining sites in the Churchrock area. Residents of the Red Water Pond Road community told her how USEPA had to remove 6 to 12 inches of radium-contaminated soils from around their homes in spring 2007. EPA said the emergency soil removal was needed to reduce exposures while federal and tribal agencies negotiate with General Electric (GE) to reclaim the former United Nuclear

Corp. (UNC) Northeast Church Rock Mine. (UNC is now a wholly owned subsidiary of GE.)

In September, MASE worked with Pueblo of Laguna officials and staff to organize a tour of the now-reclaimed Jackpile Mine, once the world’s largest open-pit uranium mine. Residents of the village of Pagate described for the lieutenant governor damage to their homes and buildings from blasting at the mine between 1953 and 1982. Pueblo environmental officers discussed the challenges of reclaiming nearly 3,000 acres that were disturbed during mining, pointing out that human and livestock use of the land is still precluded to promote revegetation and



Former Uranium miners Scotty Begay and Larry King (far right) talk to students from Colorado College about the history of mining on the Navajo Reservation.

allow for environmental monitoring. Residents of the Cebolleta Land Grant, which borders Laguna Pueblo lands, told Denish that they, too, face impacts from past uranium development, in particular the unreclaimed St. Anthony open-pit mine that UNC also operated in the 1970s and early 1980s.

After seeing the close proximity of abandoned mining sites to residences in the Churchrock area, Denish told participants in the tour that she was uncomfortable with new uranium development moving forward before clean

up is completed. At the Laguna tour of the Jackpile Mine, she suggested the state need a standard of “substantially complete” to define how much reclamation should be accomplished before the state and federal government permitted new mining. Denish said they thought “substantially complete” should mean that about 90 percent of AUMs and off-site areas would have to be remediated.


DEBUNKING URANIUM INDUSTRY’S “BONZANA”

MASE, in collaboration with NMELC, sponsored a public forum in Gallup in September on featuring a presentation by University of Montana economist Thomas M. Power on the economics of uranium mining. Power said that the industry was using “folk economics” to project billions of dollars of revenues from new mining, findings based largely on unrealistic projections of new mining activity and overly simplistic analyses. Power, whose study was commissioned by NMELC, said that the economies of the two principal uranium-producing counties in the state, McKinley and Cibola, had not only recovered from the “bust” of the uranium market in the early-1980s, but had created new jobs and income from economic sectors closely associated with people’s perceptions of wanting to live in a clean environment. Especially important to this recovery is the growing reputation of the cities of Gallup and Grants as retirement destinations.

Power also presented his findings to the annual conference of the Western Mining Action Network and to a subcommittee of the New Mexico Legislature’s Legislative Finance Committee (LFC). He told the LFC that legislators, looking for new sources of tax income to replace projected reductions in oil and gas revenues, should not count on any income from uranium operations in the next five years or longer. In July, MASE groups had demanded that the LFC give equal time for Power’s testimony after hearing New Mexico State University economists paint a glowing picture of statewide economic and employment benefits from the construction and operation of up to 15 new mines and three new mills in the next four years. Power’s appearance before the LFC in September was in response to those demands. (The competing economic studies discussed here will be posted on SRIC’s web site, www.sric.org.)

COMMENTING ON NRC’S GEIS

NRC’s draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) on uranium ISL mining met with pointed criticism from community groups during three public hearings in early September. Representatives of MASE-affiliated groups asserted that NRC will use the GEIS to limit public involvement and environmental review of individual ISL mine applications — a charge NRC officials repeatedly denied. They also said that ISL impacts are site-specific, and that a generic approach cannot be used to analyze those impacts effectively. And they criticized NRC for refusing to consider cumulative impacts of conventional uranium mining and milling in the GEIS and for not fully disclosing information on the uranium industry’s difficulties of restoring solution-mined aquifers to their original baseline water quality conditions.

The grassroots and NGO commentaries on the GEIS stood in stark contrast to testimony by company executives and uranium-industry supporters who generally congratulated NRC for helping “streamline” and “expedite” ISL licensing — a pat on the back that NRC officials tried to dispel at the public hearings. While the draft GEIS met with unbridled enthusiasm among many commenters who evinced no evidence of having read the document, it was also roundly criticized by NMED Secretary Ron Curry in a letter to the NRC. Curry reiterated the state’s position that every individual ISL licensing decision must be accompanied by a full EIS — a policy first enunciated by Governor Bill Richardson during scoping meetings on the GEIS in 2007. 

The comment period on the GEIS ends on November 7, 2008. See www.nrc.gov/materials/fuel-cycle-fac/licensing/geis.html for more information on the GEIS.

MASE Members

The five core groups of the Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment and their purposes are:

- **Bluewater Valley Downstream Alliance** — grassroots group made up largely of residents and property owners directly affected by groundwater pollution and radiation releases from the Homestake Mining Company uranium mill and tailings pile near Milan, N.M., and by historic discharges of mining and milling wastes from dozens of mines and two other uranium mills in the Ambrosia Lake Mining District northwest of Grants, N.M. Visit <http://bvdownstreamalliance.org/>.
- **Dineh Bidziil Coalition** — a coalition of Diné grassroots groups dedicated to protecting water resources and traditional cultural practices and areas from resource development and extraction on the Navajo Nation. Visit www.wman-info.org/thenetwork/profiles/dinehbidziil/.
- **Eastern Navajo Diné Against Uranium Mining** — a grassroots group opposing construction of the Crownpoint Uranium Project, a uranium *in situ* leach (ISL) mining operation proposed for two sites in Churchrock Chapter and two in Crownpoint Chapter of the Navajo Nation.
- **Laguna-Acoma Coalition for a Safe Environment** — a grassroots group of residents of Laguna and Acoma pueblos dedicated to assessing community and environmental health from impacts of past uranium development and protecting sacred cultural sites and areas, including Mt. Taylor in west-central New Mexico. Visit www.wman-info.org/thenetwork/profiles/lagunaacomacoalition/.
- **Post-71 Uranium Workers Committee** — a group of former uranium miners, millers, ore haulers and drillers who aim to document health conditions among people who worked in the uranium industry after 1971 and eventually to win eligibility for post-1971 uranium workers under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), as amended. Visit www.post71exposure.org.

Other grassroots groups and nongovernmental organizations affiliated with MASE, as of September 2008, are:

- Amigos Bravos, Taos, NM (www.amigosbravos.org)
- McKinley Community Health Alliance, Gallup, NM
- Moquino Mutual Domestic Water Consumers Association, Seboyeta, NM
- New Mexico Environmental Justice Working Group, Albuquerque, NM
- New Mexico Environmental Law Center (www.nmenvirolaw.org), Santa Fe, NM
- Office of Peace, Justice and Creation Stewardship, Gallup, NM
- Partnership for Earth Spirituality, Albuquerque, NM
- Ramah Navajo Community, Ramah, NM
- Red Water Pond Road Community Association, Coyote Canyon Chapter, Navajo Nation
- SAGE (Sacred Alliance for Grassroots Equality) Council, Albuquerque, NM (www.sagecouncil.org)
- Sierra Club Environmental Justice Office, Flagstaff, AZ (www.sierraclub.org/ej/contacts.asp)
- Southwest Research and Information Center (www.sric.org)
- Stewards of Creation, Albuquerque and Gallup, NM