



Uranium salts cover the banks of the Puerco River after the July 1979 spill.

A Community Member's Perspective on *Uranium Mine Cleanup*

BY TEDDY NEZ

RED WATER POND ROAD COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION | COYOTE CANYON CHAPTER, NAVAJO NATION

The Red Water Pond Road Community Association (RWPRCA) is a grassroots organization of Diné families who have experienced and lived with the impacts of uranium mining and milling in the Church Rock mining area since the 1960s. Our mission is to restore the land and water contaminated by uranium mining, improve the health of community members, and protect and preserve the natural and cultural environment in which we live. We seek long-term protection of human health, air, water, land, vegetation and light for our families today and for future generations.

As a community group affiliated with the Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment (MASE), RWPRCA shares MASE's vision for "a respectful, peaceful community enjoying a healthy environment."

RWPRCA was founded April 7, 2007, two days after Navajo Nation officials told us that some of our families would have to temporarily move while the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) removed radioactive soil from around our homes. Some of our families live within 1,000 feet of the Northeast Church Rock Mine, EPA's highest priority abandoned uranium mine on the Navajo Nation. Others in our community live near the former United Nuclear Corp. (UNC) uranium mill tailings facility, which is a federal Superfund site and the site of the worst uranium waste spill in U.S. history.

Many of us are part of the same extended family that has lived in the area for seven generations — long before the uranium mines came. We take our name from the Navajo road that serves our community, and which itself has been found to be contaminated with radioactive mine wastes. Our members are families in the Red Water Pond Road, Pipeline Road, and Old Churchrock Mine Road areas.

In addition to suffering from ill health from working in the mines, many of our members suffer from depression, anxiety, and short tempers simply because we live in a contaminated area. The uncertainty and fears about living with long-term, chronic exposure to radiation and uranium in the dirt around our home have affected my own family. Some members of my family are on edge, easily startled, and angered at times. At other times, they feel numb, unable to express emotions toward friends and loved ones. Some family members try to avoid reminders of the fact that they live just a few yards from contaminated soil that's 50–120 times normal background radiation levels. As a Vietman veteran, their

reactions remind me of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS) that my military comrades and I suffered after our combat experiences during the war. I have also experienced another form of PTSS as a person who grew up near Tuba City on the western side of the Navajo Nation and was relocated as a result of the Navajo/Hopi Land Dispute.

But not talking about it does not remove the fears from their minds — fears about loved ones who are sick, about the damage already done and about whether their children have been placed at future risk. The burden of guilt and worry and lack of control creates a relentless pressure. That worry creeps into their sleep: they tell me they experience vivid nightmares about the mines and

At school, our children respond negatively to simple words like "uranium" and "yellow," which calls to mind uranium yellowcake. These simple, seemingly harmless words distract them from their schoolwork as they worry about whether their family and animals are safe. My 12-year-old grandson checks the sheep, concerned that some appear to be turning yellow as they graze at the edge of the contaminated arroyo just a few feet from our home.

Is this post-traumatic stress syndrome? There is a growing body of academic evidence to support this idea. Research has shown how the legacies of colonialism, violence, relocation and assimilation have created long-term symptoms of trauma among Native Americans.

Residents of Red Water Pond Road say that they have been traumatized by watching their loved ones suffer with disease, and by the knowledge that they are living — day in and day out — surrounded by air, water, plants and soil that may be contaminated with substances we cannot see, feel, smell or taste. They feel that their land and physical well-being have been invaded. They fear "relocation," a word that is heavy with the history of forced removal of Native peoples from their land. My family is uncertain of how long we'll be able to remain on our homeland, where the family has lived for at least seven generations. They fear that, if they're forced to move, they will not be able to continue their way of life, with children raised among grandparents who can pass down their traditions.

Already some of the younger generations have left. They are reluctant and sad to do so, but those who have left are also unwilling to have their children live in a contaminated area. No one told their parents and grandparents of the dangers of the mines. In good conscience, some of the younger adults say, they cannot knowingly

subject their children to these dangers. They are forced to sacrifice their children's cultural education to protect their health. In this way, we are losing the closeness of our family and our traditions.

We have waited many years for the clean up of our community to begin. But now that it has, we do not want to have to choose between our health and our way of life. We continue to ask for long-term protection of our health and environment (including our sacred sites and the herbs and plants used in our traditional medicine), for treatment of our health problems, including our PTSS, with both western medicine and traditional medicine, and studies of the health of our livestock. 🦅



A grandson of Teddy Nez watches the equipment remove soil as part of the 2009 "removal action."



Historical photo of the Northeast Church Rock Mine.

about disease, where the earth that is supposed to nurture them becomes a dangerous no man's land. Those who are old enough to remember the time when the mines were in operation have waking dreams and flashbacks in which they hear the dull roar of the generators and the rumble of uncovered trucks that hauled off tons of radioactive soil that blew across the valley and settled on their land.

CONTACT INFORMATION
Redwater Pond Road Community Association
P.O. Box 4346,
Gallup NM 87305