

Comments on the Draft EIS for the Proposed Disposal of Northeast Church Rock Uranium Mine Waste at the United Nuclear Corporation Mill Site

Provided in interviews with members of the Red Water Pond Road Community

February 22 – March 3, 2021

During the public comment period for the proposed Church Rock project, members of the Red Water Pond Road Community (RWPRC) expressed their preference to hold in-person meetings with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) staff to discuss the proposed project. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities to meet in person were not possible. However, the NRC staff held meetings by telephone with interested members of the RWPRC to hear their comments or answer questions the project and the NRC's draft environmental impact statement (EIS). Comments or questions that were raised during those telephone conversations are summarized below, and the comments are captured as part of the comment summary report in an appendix of the final EIS. The community members the NRC staff spoke with are Annie Benally (AB), Jean Pinto (JP), Peterson Bell (PB), and Jackie Bell-Jefferson (JBJ). Their comments are provided below under the heading relevant to the comment topics.

EPA Actions and Decisions

(AB) One person stated they provided oral comments during the period when the EPA solicited input for the proposed alternatives to remove mine waste from the Northwest Church Rock Mine. The member asked the NRC staff what happened to those comments and wanted to know how the EPA responded.

(JP) A person expressed frustration that the mine and mill waste would not be moved to a site far away, stating the waste should not be put in the backyards of the residents. She stated residents don't want to be sick most of their lives.

Traffic

(AB) A person asked about the volume of traffic to the site. She also noted she had been given the opportunity to move away from the RWPRC due to the increased traffic associated with the proposed project. The person asked whether the federal government would support transportation for people living farther up the canyon. This person asked whether her family would be able to use the roads to check on the family's cattle during the proposed project.

Ecological Resources

(AB) A person asked if the project proponent would take care to not disturb land areas containing trees, herbs, and other plants important to the community.

Air Quality

(AB) A person stated that while the mine was active, there was a significant amount of dust. Community members were never warned of the hazard and never told that they should move. This person asked if air monitoring would be conducted while the waste is being moved.

(JBJ) (JP) (PB) A few people noted that the area is windy and that dust poses a hazard to nearby residents.

Water Resources

(AB) A person asked if the groundwater corrective actions ongoing at the United Nuclear Mill Site would restore the groundwater to its original condition.

(JBJ) A resident asked about the ponds at the United Nuclear Mill Site, stating that she observed steam rising from the ponds and asking whether that means dangerous chemicals are rising into the air. She asked how she would know this is not a safe area – there is no barrier.

General Proposal

(PB) A person asked how much mine waste would be moved to the mill site and asked whether a conveyor would be used to move the waste instead of trucks. This person also asked whether the waste would be moved across Highway 566 and whether there would be cleanup of the little canyon. He also asked what the proposed cover material consists of.

Safety

(PB) One person expressed concern about the jetty area and asked about what is being proposed and whether it would be safe.

(PB) One person expressed concern that the adding the mine waste could cause the mill tailings pile to cave in.

Land Use

(PB) A person asked when livestock could be raised on the mill site land again.

Earthquakes

(JBJ) A person asked about the potential impacts from a major disaster such as an earthquake, given the presence of hazardous materials.

Safety of Nearby Residences

(AB) One person stated she does not want Navajo Nation historic resources to be harmed and expressed concerns about potential damage to her home by earth-moving activities involving heavy machinery. This person stated she does not want her residence to be harmed again.

She asked how this would affect local people and who would be responsible if damage were to occur.

(JBJ) A person asked how the residents on Pipeline Road and near the intersection of Highway 566 and Pinedale Road would be affected.

Waste Management

(AB) The resident asked what the term “waste management” meant. She also asked where contaminated waste would go and how the community would be kept informed on this issue. The NRC staff understood this question to be referring to management of the higher concentration mine waste at the site.

Cumulative Impacts

(AB) A person asked for an explanation of the table (Exhibit E) addressing cumulative impacts that the NRC provided in its summary of the Draft EIS (available at <https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML2029/ML20295A709.pdf>).

Schedule

(JBJ) (JP) (PB) Several people emphasized the need to clean up the site and expressed concern about delays in the cleanup. They asked when the clean up would begin and asked if the project would be continuous once it begins, without further delays. One person asked if budget issues or other factors could cause the project to be postponed. She stated that it would be good to get the waste out, and the sooner the better. Another person said they want the land to be clean enough to live on.

Public Process

(AB) One person stated she does not care for talking on the phone and expressed a preference for in-person discussions. She stated the information may be clear to the NRC staff, but it is not clear to her. She also stated she had not had time to review the entire Draft EIS.

Environmental Justice

(JBJ) A person expressed frustration about the time it has taken to clean up the site, emphasizing that children need to be able to go outside and saying that the problem is the color of her skin.

Other Topics

(JBJ) A person noted she has some health problems but cannot qualify for cost-free care under Medicaid. She stated that she and her family should be able to receive cost-free care, and that she is not responsible for the problems with the site that have impacted her health.

(JBJ) One person stated she had moved into a new house under the alternative housing program associated with the project. She described several problems with the house and stated that her electricity costs have doubled since she moved.

(JP) A person asked about the criteria for eligibility to qualify for alternative housing. She emphasized that residents have faced challenges since the mine opened.