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## PRESIDENT BEGAYE CALLS FOR EXPEDIENT REIMBURSEMENT TO NAVAJO FARMERS DURING ROUNDTABLE COMMEMORATING GOLD KING MINE SPILL



President Russell Begaye told Acting Administrator for Region 9, Alexis Strauss, that the US EPA needs to keep these lines of communication open with the Navajo Nation in continuing to discuss its needs post-Gold King Mine spill.

FARMINGTON, NM- U.S. Representative Ben R. Lujan (D - NM) facilitated a roundtable discussion commemorating the one-year anniversary of the Gold King Mine disaster on Tuesday, Aug. 10, at the Sycamore Community Center in Farmington, N.M.

Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye joined tribal, state, county and municipal leaders calling for immediate post-disaster remediation and expedient reimbursement to Navajo farmers. Acting Administrator for EPA's Region 9 Office, Alexis Strauss joined the roundtable discussion via video conference to hear and respond directly to the leaders.

The Gold King Mine spill unleashed 3,000,000 gallons of yellow toxic sludge into the Animas and San Juan Rivers on Wednesday, Aug. 5, 2015.

President Begaye recounted the day the disaster happened and

his travels to the mine to get a first hand account of the full impact of the spill.

"When I first saw the Animas River had turned yellow from the spill, I questioned what needed to be done to protect the Navajo Nation and our people," he said. "The sludge moved down river very fast. I had to consider how it would impact the Nation's irrigation, farming, livestock and ranching."

Upon visiting the mine on Sunday, Aug. 9, 2015, President Begaye took samples of the water which he noted was "mustard yellow". The irrigation canals along the San Juan River on the Navajo Nation were closed the day after the spill by the Division of Natural Resource upon notification from the State.

This closure and toxic water crisis devastated Navajo farmers, President Begaye said during the roundtable discussion.



**During the commemorative roundtable discussion on the Gold King Mine spill, President Russell Begaye told US EPA's Acting Regional Director Strauss that Navajo farmers are still waiting for reimbursement costs they incurred on account of the spill.**

"It's been a year now and our farmers are still waiting to be compensated," he said.

The president told Acting Regional Director Strauss that the US EPA has created a culture of distrust with the Navajo Nation and its farmers. He noted how rapidly the US EPA responded to the water contamination crisis in Flint, Mich., in comparison to their response in the Gold King Mine spill.

"Why didn't that happen in the state of New Mexico during the Gold King Mine spill?" he asked. "That type of rapid response should have happened here."

During the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs' Oversight Hearing on the EPA's role in the Gold King Mine Disaster that took place on Sep. 16, 2015, US EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy said the Agency would take responsibility for the GKM spill.

"We need to hold the US EPA to their word according to their testimony," President Begaye said. "We are still waiting for reimbursement."

Acting Regional Director Strauss said the US EPA has recently awarded over \$3M to states and tribes for the costs they incurred during the Gold King Mine spill.

On Aug. 5, the US EPA awarded the Navajo Nation roughly \$445,000 for response cost reimbursement, taking the total reimbursement to approximately \$602,000. That is only a quarter of the \$2,132,535.86 in response cost reimbursements claimed by

the Nation.

This amount awarded is not nearly sufficient in addressing the costs the Nation incurred, and completely leaves out Navajo farmers and the costs they bore in trying to save their fields during the spill, said President Begaye.

Strauss asked the gathered leaders to draft letters to the US EPA listing their requests in moving forward toward remediation and further reimbursements to their communities.

The president asked that the US EPA conduct long-term monitoring of metals and contaminants in the San Juan River and along the riverbed. A local lab for testing and sampling water from the river along with the establishment of a Navajo Regional EPA Agency were two other requests President Begaye said he would like to have the US EPA address.

President Begaye also sent a letter to the EPA on June 7 requesting the agency to look into creating a separate Navajo EPA region. Currently the Navajo Nation must coordinate between several EPA regions that are headquartered far from the nation.

"This is not over. The US EPA needs to continue to keep these lines of communication open with the Navajo Nation and continue to discuss our current needs and those we have previously mentioned," President Begaye said. "We will continue to push the US EPA in reimbursing our farmers for their losses."

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