

The NRC, as an independent regulatory agency, ensures the safe use of radioactive material while protecting people and the environment. The NRC regulates uranium milling and mill tailings disposal on tribal reservations through licensing, inspection and enforcement of regulations.

The NRC does not regulate mining.

Uranium Milling

Milling is the first step in making natural uranium ore into fuel for nuclear reactors. Uranium mills use chemicals to extract uranium and make “yellowcake,” a powder that can be processed into fuel. They produce “mill tailings,” a sandy waste containing heavy metals and radioactive materials.

In 1978 Congress passed a law to ensure that uranium mill tailings would be safely managed into the future. Under that law, the Department of Energy (DOE) is responsible for the long-term care and maintenance of the four former mill sites on the Navajo Nation: Mexican Hat, Utah; Monument Valley, Ariz.; Shiprock, N.M.; and Tuba City, Ariz. The NRC oversees DOE’s management of these sites.

Contact the NRC

Tribal Liaison Program

The NRC Tribal Liaison team will foster effective consultation, cooperation, and communication between the NRC and Tribal governments.

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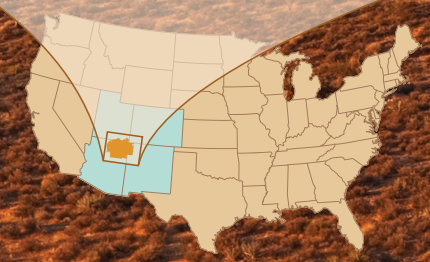
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U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s Role in the Five-Year Plan to Address Uranium Contamination in the Navajo Nation



NRC's Role in the Five-Year Plan

The NRC and other Federal agencies are working to address uranium contamination in consultation with the Navajo Nation. In 2007, the agencies developed a coordinated Five-Year Plan that outlined a strategy to gain a better understanding of the scope of the problem and address the greatest risks first. In addition to the NRC, the Federal agencies are the Department of Energy (DOE), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, and the Indian Health Service.

During the first five years, the agencies focused on collecting data, identifying the most imminent risks and addressing contaminated structures, water supplies, mills, dumps, and mines with the highest levels of radiation. They learned more about the scope of the problem and the work that needs to be done.

In 2014, the agencies published a second Five-Year Plan that builds on the information gathered and the lessons learned during the first five years. The agencies are committed to continuing to work with the Navajo Nation to reduce the risks to health and the environment. Under the Five-Year Plan each agency plays a specific role.

Mill Tailings Sites

The NRC's role is to provide continuing oversight of the uranium mill tailings disposal sites on the Navajo Nation that have been transferred to DOE. As the licensee, DOE has responsibility for long-term surveillance and maintenance of the disposal sites. The NRC reviews and provides comments on any reports DOE produces about the sites. The NRC conducts inspections at the sites in conjunction with DOE. If DOE revises the long-term surveillance plan or groundwater compliance action plan for a disposal site, the NRC will work with the DOE and all other authorities to ensure that the plans are adequate. The NRC will also review, and if the plan is adequate, concur on groundwater compliance action plans for the former processing site in Monument Valley.

UNC Mill Site

United Nuclear Corp. (UNC) is licensed by the NRC to possess uranium mill tailings at the UNC mill site. They will be filing a license amendment to allow Northeast Church Rock mine waste to be disposed in the NRC-licensed facility at the mill. The NRC will work closely with EPA, DOE, the New Mexico Environment Department, and the Navajo Nation during the NRC's review of the amendment request. The NRC will review the amendment request and the design of the disposal unit to ensure that they meet safety and environmental requirements.

NRC Tribal Liaison Program

The NRC Tribal Liaison Program conducts outreach and seeks to engage Tribal Nations in the NRC's safety and security mission. For the Five-Year Plan, the NRC Tribal Liaison Program is active in the Community

Outreach Network, and works to enhance knowledge and community empowerment in achieving the goals of the Plan. The NRC provides information and education on uranium milling and radiation on the Navajo Nation.

