

October 7, 2019

SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
OVERSIGHT FIELD HEARING OPENING STATEMENT

*“America’s Nuclear Past: Examining the Effects of Radiation in Indian Country”*

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Good morning, and welcome to Indian Country.

I’m Tom Udall, and as Vice Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, it’s my pleasure to chair today’s hearing in my home state of New Mexico. I look forward to a good discussion.

But before we begin, a few housekeeping items.

Today's hearing is an official Senate Committee on Indian Affairs field hearing. The Committee will hear testimony from two panels of witnesses, and members of Congress will ask the witnesses questions.

As official Committee business, the format for today's hearing is the same as the format we use for hearings in Washington.

It is not a town hall, for example -- where folks speak out from the audience and ask questions.

So, while we are here to take testimony from our invited witnesses, anyone is welcome to submit *written* testimony that will be made part of the record for these proceedings.

I invite you to email your written submissions to [testimony@Indian.Senate.gov](mailto:testimony@Indian.Senate.gov). That's [testimony@Indian.Senate.gov](mailto:testimony@Indian.Senate.gov). The official record will remain open for two weeks -- until October 21.

Also, please feel free to talk to my staff, or Chairman Hoeven's staff, after the hearing with any questions. They are seated behind me and around the auditorium.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here, and for Congresswoman Deb Haaland and Congressman Ben Ray Lujan for joining us today. Both members are champions for their districts, for New Mexico, and for all of Indian Country. Thank you, Deb and Ben Ray.

Finally, a special thanks to our hosts, the Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institute, for hosting us in their wonderful facilities.

And for SIPI's staff for working with us to pull this hearing together.

Today's hearing, entitled "America's Nuclear Past: Examining the Effects of Radiation in Indian Country," is an opportunity for us to reflect on the unique history and legacy of the atomic age in Indian Country. Uranium mining played a key role in our country's development of its nuclear arsenal during the Cold War.

Much of that mining took place in Indian Country here in New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and across the West. Exposing uranium workers miners to toxic levels of radiation in the process.

My father, Stewart Udall, and I brought the stories of deceased Navajo uranium miners to light and sued on behalf of their widows for fair compensation by the federal government.

In addition to the Navajo miners, countless others were unknowingly exposed to radiation,

sacrificing their health, and even their lives, to the Cold War effort.

Many of these downwinders, miners, and millers have long since passed. Others are still living with the effects of uranium contamination, decades after mining ceased. So I'm working hard in Congress for legislation that would provide just treatment to victims of radiation exposure through amendments to the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.

Today's hearing is about understanding the past and remedying past wrongs. It's also a call to action for the present and future.

Native Americans in particular have been disproportionately impacted by nuclear weapons development, testing, and uranium ore mining.

For instance, eight Northern Pueblos sit at the foothills of the Los Alamos National Laboratory.



For generations, tribal members have worked at the labs -- during the development of the first Atomic bomb, and to this day.

Being in close proximity to highly toxic and radioactive materials has led many to experience serious health conditions linked to radiation exposure.

And during the testing at Trinity in southern New Mexico and the Nevada Test Site, many Tribal nations -- including the Mescalero Apache, Navajo, and Hopi -- were downwind of

nuclear fallout, exposing their citizens, livestock, water, and food supply to dangerous radiation. With little to no warning.

Cancer, respiratory illness, and many other health problems soon followed and continue to this day.

While these stories are tragic, and must be told, I should acknowledge that the federal government has made some progress to make amends.

Federal compensation laws, like the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act and the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act, were passed.

Federal agencies, like the Department of Energy Office of Legacy Management, were established to clean up and maintain abandoned uranium mines and sites.

However, much work remains. Thousands of abandoned uranium mines dot the Western landscape, hundreds on the Navajo Nation

alone. Continuing to expose families to the ill effects of radiation, including kidney failure and cancer – conditions linked to uranium contamination.

New research from the Centers for Disease Control report uranium in babies born even now.

I vow to continue to fight for the Cold War victims of radiation exposure.

I will continue to push for my legislation to amend RECA to include post 71 miners and the Trinity downwinders.

And to ensure that the federal government lives up to its legal and fiduciary obligations to cleanup and properly maintain the abandoned mines and sites.

To live up to its trust and treaty obligations to Tribes. Which is why we are holding this hearing today.

We want to ensure accountability when it comes to clean up, and hear directly from the administration on what it is doing to address the legacy of uranium mining in Indian Country.

And to hear from Tribal leaders and stakeholders whose constituencies have been impacted.

I'll conclude my opening statement by simply acknowledging how personal this issue is to me.

I already mentioned that my father and I first began working with the widows of Navajo uranium miners in 1977, to fight for justice and government accountability.

We sued the federal government on behalf of those widows to get the benefits they deserved for the preventable deaths of their husbands working in the mines, and for their years of suffering. The money would never make up for their loss, but it was the least we could do.

We fought against the federal government's the "King Can Do No Wrong" ideology of sovereign immunity under the guise of national security.

And reminded the courts that the federal government has a trust and treaty obligation to Native Americans, recognized by the Supreme Court.

Well, we lost. But we persevered and were able to make some progress with respect to RECA.



And we will continue to persevere. I will keep up the Udall family fight for justice for America's Cold War victims.

I look forward to today's testimony. Again, thank you to the witnesses for being here.