

Board of Commissioners hears presentation for uranium mining task force

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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The McKinley County Board of Commissioners gave the floor to a community member for a presentation during the July 30 regular meeting.

Percy Anderson spoke to the Board of Commissioners about establishing the McKinley County Blue Ribbon Uranium Task Force, which will gather data on the impacts of uranium mining in McKinley County communities through issues with health, groundwater, watersheds, and the impact on the local economy.

“The task force will conduct public hearings where citizens of the community will have an opportunity to provide their personal stories,” Anderson said.

The stories of local citizens as well as the data gathered by the force will be used to create a report with policy recommendations for the Board of Commissioners as a form of guidance from a grassroots level, Anderson continued.

Anderson and other people involved with the task force have been meeting with the Board of Commissioners since 2016 to discuss matters related to uranium mining.

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The task force is viewed as a working group, where county residents work with task force allies, Anderson said. The group will include advisors, or members with experience in a certain field who can provide advice to task force members.

Janene Yazzie, community advocate, said uranium has been continually promoted as an energy source, and the proper care should be taken when handling it or being in areas affected by it.

“We want to ensure [that the] same type of safety and approach [used with other dangerous materials] is taken to resuming uranium mining,” Yazzie said.

Yazzie spoke about the impact uranium mining has had on McKinley County communities, and how there has been a poor record of proper cleanup of radioactive and toxic contamination.

The task force will aim to find out the economic costs of natural resource and public health impacts from uranium mining; any costs and benefits from proposed uranium development; the proper infrastructure for uranium development; how much of McKinley County water has been affected by uranium mining; and whether or not McKinley County is ready to respond to a major radioactive incident.

Information gathered by the task force will allow for the creation of policies that can best protect local resources and people, Yazzie said.

“A healthy workforce equals a healthy economy,” she added.

Despite what was said by Anderson and Yazzie, County Commissioner Billy Moore said he was confused about the purpose of the task force other than activism.

“I think it needs to focus on education for people,” Moore said. “Uranium is a natural resource, and there are a lot of dangers. But there needs to be more education and research on both the

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pros and cons.”

Yazzie said she agreed the task force should have fair representation of opinions on the matter, but that there is a reason the group will be comprised of community members.

“We’re from impacted communities,” she said. “We want to present this not as activists, but as concerned citizens.”

Anderson added the national government could implement policies in coming years that could influence the direction local communities take on the matter, which is why it is important that the task force shares the experiences of people who have been affected by uranium mining.

Moore responded by saying the task force could benefit McKinley County in the long run, but that it’s important for it to present informed, unbiased viewpoints.

“We need to have information from both sides on the matter to make good decisions,” Moore said.

The item was just a presentation, so no action was taken by the Board of Commissioners. McKinley County Chair Bill Lee said the matter of establishing a uranium task force will be revisited in about a month.

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