

New Mexico, Arizona governors seek federal support to transform uranium mine cleanup

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Santa Fe — New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs called for significant changes in national abandoned uranium mine cleanup policy in a letter to the federal government on April 9.

In a letter to Brenda Mallory, Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality, Lujan Grisham and Hobbs requested a renewed commitment from the federal government, including a clear point of contact to work with Arizona, New Mexico, and tribal communities to address long-standing uranium contamination on state and private lands. A strategic partnership consisting of a federal decision-maker, an Arizona decision-maker, and a New Mexico decision-maker, along with Tribal decision makers, will streamline the work of more than two dozen federal and state agencies and regions with varying jurisdictions.

“A new federal, state, and tribal governance structure is needed to bring rapid and transformative changes to communities that have suffered for decades from abandoned uranium mining sites,” Lujan Grisham said. “New Mexico is committed to nimble decision-making while ensuring safe cleanup and disposal of these legacy wastes.”

Most uranium mining started in the 1950s, decades before federal and state environmental protections went into effect. As a result, many uranium mining sites were abandoned with no cleanup actions taken. Much of the mining supported federal government interests, primarily national security, which is why it is incumbent upon the federal government to financially assist with cleanup. Currently, there is no federal program for cleaning up these sites.

New Mexico and Arizona have more than 650 abandoned uranium mines combined, including more than 110 on state and private lands, that are not being addressed and do not have the funding necessary for cleanup. New Mexico was the largest producer of uranium ore (supplying

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over 35 million tons, which amounts to nearly half of total domestic ore) and suffered from one of the largest radioactive environmental disasters in American history during the 1979 Church Rock uranium mill spill.

The New Mexico Environment Department, in partnership with the Energy, Minerals, and Natural Resources Department and under the directive of recent legislation, has created a dashboard to increase transparency for the public on the reclamation status of formerly operating uranium mine and mill sites across New Mexico. The dashboard summarizes mine and mill site information, relevant regulatory action under the jurisdiction of NMED and EMNRD, and displays information for other non-permitted sites where available. The information is displayed with land ownership information, legislative districts, mining district boundaries, and other helpful contextual layers that allow the public to toggle the layers on and off. The map is an update and expansion of EMNRD's 2011 Legacy Uranium Mines Dashboard.

A map of the formerly operating uranium mine and mill sites can be found at <https://nmenv.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/690621694d4e4906b2ae2886f528eec1>

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