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For Immediate Release: May 1, 2007
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EPA to begin soil cleanup at five properties on Navajo Nation

SAN FRANCISCO – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in conjunction with the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency, will begin cleaning up radium-contaminated soil the second week in May at five residential properties in the Coyote Canyon Chapter of the Navajo Nation, near Gallup, New Mex.

“I would like to thank U.S. EPA for undertaking these actions to protect our people and our culture,” said Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr. “We stood alone up against large uranium development corporations for the longest time, and the Navajo Nation EPA's persistence in advocating for our safety, our culture, and our sovereignty is finally paying off.”

“This is the first of several sites where Navajo Nation EPA and U.S. EPA will undertake aggressive clean up actions, and the majority is associated with historical uranium mining and milling activities,” said Stephen B. Etsitty, executive director for the Navajo Nation EPA.

“The U.S. EPA and the Navajo Nation EPA are working together to ensure that personal and cultural needs of the affected residents are properly addressed,” said Keith Takata, the EPA’s Superfund Director for the Pacific Southwest region. “This soil removal will prevent direct human contact with the radium-contaminated soil, and make it safe for families and pets to play in their yards,”

The EPA believes rain and flash floods likely washed contaminated soils from the former Northeast Church Rock uranium mine site into an unnamed arroyo and ultimately onto the residential properties. The area’s prevailing winds are also believed to have transported contaminated dust from the mine site.

In November, the EPA and the NNEPA sampled soil and tested radium levels at the mine site, and investigated residential properties located down gradient of the mine presumed to be impacted by contamination. Workers found elevated levels of radium in surface soils at the homes and hogans.

The EPA analyzed the samples for radium and other contaminants and calculated exposure levels to determine the amount a person may be exposed to in the yard over an extended period of time. The EPA determined that soil removal at five of the residential yards was necessary to prevent radium exposure to residents. Concentrations of other contaminants were not elevated.

Residents will be provided temporary lodging during the cleanup, which will take approximately two weeks. The EPA will excavate surface soil and replace with clean soil at each residence, and investigate inside the homes to ensure contaminated dust is not present within the structures.

The EPA and the NNEPA will continue their assessment and necessary cleanup of the Northeast Churchrock uranium mine site to ensure safety of the local residents.

The 125-acre Northeast Church Rock Mine site operated from approximately 1967 to 1982, and includes two underground uranium shafts, waste piles, several surface ponds, buried waste and sand fill areas.

Exposure to elevated levels of radium over a long period of time may result in harmful effects including anemia, cataracts, fractured teeth, and cancer, especially bone cancer.

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