

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 18, 2012

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

We request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine the results of the federal government's first Five-Year Plan to begin to address the health and environmental impacts resulting from decades of uranium contamination in and around the Navajo Nation. As the end of the term of this plan approaches, the information provided by GAO's report will be helpful in assessing the federal government's performance and in determining how best to continue its efforts to clean up uranium contamination in the Navajo Nation.

The Navajo Nation Reservation, comprising approximately 27,000 square miles in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, was heavily mined for uranium to support development of the atomic bomb and subsequent Cold War weapons production. From 1944 to 1986, nearly four million tons of uranium ore were extracted from Navajo lands under leases with the Navajo Nation. Although the last operating mines on the Navajo Nation closed in the mid-1980s, mining activities on the Reservation left behind hundreds of abandoned uranium mines, inactive milling sites, former dump sites, contaminated groundwater, and structures that contain elevated levels of radiation. These sites pose environmental and public health risks to the Navajo community.

In 2008, in response to a request by Congress, five federal agencies, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), the Department of Energy (DOE), and the Indian Health Service (IHS) developed the federal government's first coordinated plan, known as the Five-Year Plan, that detailed the uranium contamination cleanup efforts in and around the Navajo Nation through 2012. Periodic briefings provided by the agencies indicate that, since the initiation of this plan, significant progress has been made in addressing some of the most urgent risks on the reservation, including uranium contaminated water sources and radioactive structures. The federal and Navajo Nation agencies also have engaged in aggressive public outreach efforts to inform residents of the dangers associated with uranium contamination and have developed a study to identify the impacts of uranium exposure on the development of children in this community. However, due to the widespread damage inflicted on Navajo lands, a tremendous amount of work remains to be done. We expect the federal agencies to develop another five-year plan by the summer of 2013.

As the Five-Year Plan comes to a close on December 31, 2012, and a new five-year plan is being developed, a GAO assessment on the status and progress of the cleanup efforts will be helpful to inform the development and implementation of the federal government's actions to address uranium contamination in the Navajo Nation, and to help Congress assess the nature and adequacy of the next five-year plan. We have requested that the federal agencies provide us with a written report on the work performed under the plan by the end of the year, and believe that GAO's assessment would be timely after the completion of that report. We therefore ask that GAO assess the results of the Five-Year Plan, specifically:

1. The extent to which the federal agencies have been successful and effective in accomplishing the milestones established in the Five-Year Plan.
2. The effectiveness of the collaboration among the federal and other agencies and any ways in which collaboration and information sharing could be further improved during implementation of the next five-year plan.
3. The sufficiency of federal funding and additional funding from other sources, such as Potentially Responsible Parties, for accomplishing the milestones outlined in the Five-Year Plan.
4. The adequacy of federal agency efforts to determine future federal funding needs and the timeframe to address the remaining uranium contamination in and around the Navajo Nation.
5. The lessons learned from the Five-Year Plan that can be applied to the agencies' next five-year plan, if any.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. If you have questions or wish to clarify the scope and objectives of your study, please have your staff contact Dr. Avenel Joseph or Reece Rushing of the Natural Resources Committee Democratic Staff at (202) 225-6065 or Jeff Baran of the Energy and Commerce Democratic staff at (202) 225-4407.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
Ranking Member
Natural Resources Committee



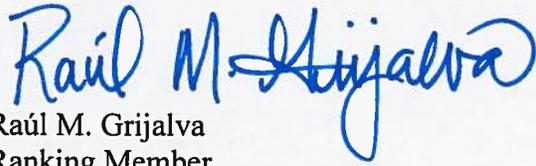
Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member
Energy and Commerce



Ben Ray Lujan
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs



Frank Pallone
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health



Raúl M. Grijalva
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests
and Public Lands



Martin Heinrich
Member of Congress