Uproar over Japan’s Decision to Disperse Fukushima Waste Water

By John LaForge

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga’s Cabinet on April 13 “gave permission” to Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) to release over 1.25 million metric tons (1.38 million US tons) of Fukushima’s radioactive waste water into the Pacific Ocean.

Japan’s cabinet said the waste water will be diluted with additional seawater before being pumped into the ocean, and that the dumping will start in two years. The government said the dispersal will continue for at least 30 years, painting a picture of indefinitely perpetuating Fukushima’s globalized pollution.

Harsh rejection of the decision was immediate and widespread, coming from Russia, China, North and South Korea, the Philippines, New Zealand, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and several Pacific Island nations, as well as the fishing industry, marine scientists, and environmentalists.

Greenpeace Japan said in a press release the decision itself and any such dumping would violate international maritime law and that the planned release “completely disregards the human rights and interests of the people in Fukushima, wider Japan, and the Asia-Pacific region.”

The Biden Administration and the International Atomic Energy Agency both announced support for the decision, but criticism came from around the world, with South Korea and China considering law suits.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in told officials look into peti- tioning the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea or filing an injunction there over Japan’s decision, Al Jazeera reported.

According to a statement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Beijing also considers Japan’s plan to be a “possible violation of interna- tional law,” the French news service AFP reported.

Part of the reason for the backlash is that 70 percent of the waste water now stored in over 1,000 giant tanks is still contaminated with dozens of highly radioactive materials. Tepco’s Advanced Liquid Processing System (ALPS) — a novel filter system that the company claimed would remove 62 isotopes from the water — has not worked. The company says it will re-filter the waste before it starts pouring it into the Pacific.

“This water is contaminated with such radionuclides as cesium-137, carbon-14, tritium (some of which will form the more dangerous ‘organi- cally bound tritium’), strontium-90, cobalt-60, iodine-129, plutonium-239, and more than 50 other hazardous radionuclides,” reported Rick Steiner, a marine biologist in Anchorage and

Navajo Nation Calls Out Feds Over Shoddy Uranium Mine Cleanup Plans

By Leona Morgan

“From 1944 to 1986, nearly 30 million tons of uranium ore were extracted from Navajo lands,” according to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in its report “Navajo Nation: Cleaning Up Abandoned Uranium Mines.” Some remediation has been done through two five-year cleanup plans, but is severely underfunded and the sites are never restored to pre-mining conditions.

The EPA frames the cleanup of 524 abandoned uranium mines on Navajo Indian Country as a collaborative effort between the US federal agen- cies charged with the cleanup — US EPA, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of Energy, Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), Navajo Area Indian Health Service, and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry — and the Navajo Nation (Navajo). Over the course of the public comment period for the Draft Environmental Impact State- ment (DEIS) on the proposed cleanup of the United Nuclear Corporation/General Electric (UNC/GE) Northwest Churchrock uranium mine, it has become glaringly clear that the federal government is not in collaboration or negotiations with Navajo at all, but rather dictating how to proceed.

Navajo EPA Superfund Director Daniel Yazzie and staff have been working to uphold the requests of the Diné Red Water Pond Road Community Association (RWPR) which will be most impacted if the controversial Churchrock cleanup plan is approved. UNC/GE proposes to “cleanup” the ura- nium mine by placing one million cubic yards of mine waste atop an existing mill waste disposal site, which is the same site as the 1979 Churchrock spill. For over a decade, RWPR has called for moving all radioactive wastes out of the area entirely. RWPR is opposed to the cleanup plan, despite the US EPA threatening that it may take several years before another is proposed.

Recently, Yazzie exposed how the US EPA doesn’t allow the Navajo Nation a seat at the table while making major decisions regarding cleanup, funds, contractors, etc. Yazzie has also slammed the NRC for moving forward a plan that is “incomplete,” as it does not include any of the recommendations from either the RWPR or the Navajo Nation, and is lacking information on design, engineering, and environmen- tal studies and impacts. Yazzie joined the RWPR and countless others who have criticized the NRC for con- ducting virtual public meetings during the pandemic, while many locals did not have access to internet or phone service and were under lockdown — due to the severity of Covid-19 in Diné communities.

In her May 24, 2021 cover letter responding to the DEIS, Navajo EPA Executive Director Valinda Shirley condemned the US government’s failure in “assuring the stability and integrity” of the initial impoundment dam which breached in 1979, “despite the approved engineering.” Shirley explains, “This failure has drastically contributed to … mistrusting of the NRC, DOE, UNC/GE, EPA and their assur- ances on any environmental remediation activity.”

The Navajo Nation EPA is not only holding the federal government accountable to clean up the Churchrock area, but is also supporting community