

Radiation Spill

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"I just heard a big roar," Nez said.

It sounded like heavy rains running through the nearby ditches, he said. But July 16, 1979, was a dry day with no clouds in sight.

The area flooded with nearly 100 million gallons of wastewater, but residents near the spill didn't know the extent of the damage the contaminated water would cause.

"At the time it was kind of like a rain storm. We didn't know the content of the water," Nez said.

Church Rock residents waded through the flood with bare feet. That's when concern started.

"People started complaining about their feet getting hot," Nez said.

Some residents went to the hospital but were released with a diagnosis of simple heat stroke, Nez said.

Three decades after the spill, not much has changed for Church Rock residents, some of them say.

"We're living in the waste," Nez said.

Hundreds of mines in the area were abandoned and never reclaimed. The ground water in the area was con-



Courtesy photo

An aerial photo, taken in 1979, of the berm built to contain the spill at United Nuclear Corporation's Church Rock Uranium Mill.

taminated and people today are still seeing the mining's health effects, which include high rates of cancers and rare forms of cancers.

Entire herds of cattle and sheep died in the wake of the disaster, Padilla said.

"After the spill we started to hear a lot of stories of cattle being born with two heads," she said.

The stories continue.

The liquid and solid waste coated and soaked into the nearby river and stream beds, said Paul Robinson, research director

at the Southwest Research and Information Center. Only about 3,400 barrels of waste materials were cleaned up and very little of the spilled liquid was pumped out of the water supply.

"Those contaminants are still there, so it is still affecting the area," Robinson said.

Contaminants from the other mines in the area also polluted the air, water and ground, he said.

There are enough contaminants to still pose a significant risk to people,

REMEMBERING THE DAY

A prayer walk to remember the Church Rock spill will be at 7 a.m. today on State Route 566 from Red Water Pond Road to Old Church Rock Mine Road.

Robinson said. But there is no evidence to confirm that commonly held belief. There were no health studies conducted in the area and no available data.

Yet, residents say they have seen the effects first hand.

In 2000, Nez was diagnosed with colon cancer.

Many others in the area have died from cancer, Nez said.

Hydro Resources, Inc., in recent years has tried to re-open the old Church Rock mine.

This worries the people who remember the disaster 30 years ago.

"There's very serious problems of several kinds," Robinson said.

Cleanup of the original mines in the area are still a long way off, he said.

At the time of the disaster, the company thought it was operating a state-of-the-art facility and the govern-

ment thought it was exercising proper oversight, he said.

"Everyone thought they were doing a good job," Robinson said.

The disaster struck.

"The spill resulted from poor oversight, poor siting and poor construction and is an example of the types of problems that occur at uranium mines and mills," Robinson said.

Now the mines sit abandoned, some uncovered, while the industry pushes to re-open mining operations with new technology.

"There is quite a bit at stake in the Church Rock area," said Robert Tohe,

environmental justice organizer with the Sierra Club.

The community is concerned with the quality of ground water, which for many serves as the only drinking supply for both community members and livestock. Navajo Nation officials are concerned with making sure its ban on uranium mining remains in effect.

And three decades after the disaster, the disdain for uranium mining companies continues.

"They left without cleaning up their mess," Padilla said.

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