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Forgotten People CDC—The Navajo Nation Laboratory

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In Navajo Nation creation stories, Monster Slayer and Born for Water twins stopped monsters from killing people. The monsters today are uranium and coal.

The Navajo Nation produces most of the energy for the Southwest, but many Navajo homes lack sanitation and piped water. In 1966, the U.S. government imposed the Bennett Freeze denying all infrastructure repairs or construction, meaning today 3 percent of families have electricity and 10 percent have running water.

During the “freeze,” more than 100 million tons of mill tailings accumulated in the Four Corners area of the Southwest. These mill tailings contain radium and thorium with a half-life of 80,000 years.

Superfund reports 520 abandoned uranium mines on Navajo Nation land, with 25 percent of the unregulated sources in the western Navajo reservation exceeding drinking water standards for kidney toxicants, including uranium.

Lack of remedial action is discrimination. Policy makers need to be educated about health implications to make informed choices, thereby avoiding unintended harm and costs. The United Nations currently holds consultations on private sector participation under provisions of water and sanitation services. People directly affected need a seat at the Navajo Nation’s and the Federal Government’s table, with participatory involvement and access to information. Partnerships are needed to deliver safe drinking water and basic sanitation to curb disease.

Traditional principles of indigenous peoples must be incorporated immediately to ensure the U.S. government meets its commitment to protect public health and the environment and reduce indigenous households lacking sanitation and safe drinking water.