

# Navajo farmers reject use of water after mine spill

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — One of the largest communities of Navajo farmers along the San Juan River has voted to keep irrigation canals closed for at least a year following a spill of toxic sludge at a Colorado gold mine.

The unanimous vote by more than 100 farmers in Shiprock, New Mexico, was heart-wrenching and guarantees the loss of many crops, Shiprock Chapter President Duane "Chili" Yazzie said Monday.

But he said farmers don't want to risk contaminating the soil for future generations.

"Our position is better safe than sorry," Yazzie said.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Navajo Nation EPA have said the water is safe for irrigation, based on surface water testing. Other communities off the reservation have cleared the water for drinking, recreation and irrigation.

The Navajo Nation has been hesitant to lift restrictions on using the river water, mostly over concerns about contaminants being stirred up and washed down the river. The Navajo Nation EPA expects to have test results from soil samples later this week.

Tribal President Russell Begaye has asked several farming and ranching communities impacted by the Aug. 5 spill from the Gold King mine near Silverton, Colorado, to weigh in by passing resolutions with an official position.

Shiprock is the only community that has submitted a resolution so far, tribal spokesman Mihio Manus said.

Begaye, who grew up in a small farmhouse in Shiprock, said he realizes the impact that keeping the water shut off will have on farmers.

"I am furious that the U.S. EPA has placed the Navajo Nation into this position," Begaye said in a news release. "Our farms will not last much longer without water, and our resources are depleting."

Manus said farmers can seek reimbursement for the costs of hauling water through their community centers, or chapters.

The EPA stopped providing agricultural water Friday on the Navajo Nation in an agreement with Begaye.

EPA spokesman David Gray said Monday the EPA is evaluating other ways of delivering water to the tribe.

Farmers in Shiprock had rejected water tanks from an EPA contractor after tribal officials complained that one appeared to have oil residue. The EPA said over the weekend that it is looking into the complaint and would work with the tribe to remove 13 tanks from the reservation.

Gray said the EPA believes the irrigation ditch on the Navajo Nation is suitable for use and the agency will continue assessing the tribe's need for resources.

The EPA is providing hay to ranchers along the river, while the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs has set up water tanks for livestock, officials said.

"When the Navajo Nation President lifts the restriction, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Navajo Regional Office will continue to provide water support for livestock for only one week after that decision is made. Then BIA will dismantle our current operations from the temporary water locations," the agency said in an email to The Associated Press.

A water treatment plant on the Utah portion of the reservation that drew water from the San Juan River also will remain offline until Begaye gives the OK for it to begin operating again, said Deenise Becenti with the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority.

Water is being hauled in to top off a tank so residents can continue to have running water in their homes, she said.

In Shiprock, a constant line of vehicles waits to fill huge containers with water. Yazzie said he spent the weekend watering about 500 of his own plants but estimates that other families have thousands that have been wilting.

"We're going to struggle to save what we can and what we lose, we'll expect somebody to provide compensation," Yazzie said.