

Phosphate mining impacts discussed at Shoshonean Reunion presentation



Environmental Waste Management Program consultant Susan Hanson.

By LORI ANN EDMO
Sho-Ban News

FORT HALL— The impacts of phosphate mining continue to affect the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes both on and off the Fort Hall Indian Reservation.

Susan Hanson, Tribal Environmental Waste Management Program consultant, Sidney Fellows, EWMP intern, along with former Fort Hall Business Council Chairman Nathan Small all spoke on the issue August 6 at the Shoshonean Reunion.

Hanson said she works mainly on hazardous waste issues as she talked about the mines impacting tribal lands on and off the reservation. She said tribal customs and health has been impacted. "And with that comes the impacts from the National Priority List superfund sites that process the ore that has left a lot of the scars on the land." The Gay Mine operated from 1946 until 1993 and it's one of the largest mines in the phosphate patch — it's around 7,000 acres and 5,000 of those acres are impacted. She explained the Gay Mine produced ore that was processed at the FMC and Simplot site. The FMC site made elemental phosphorous - it was the largest elemental phosphorus-producing plant in the United States for a while. It has been on the National Priority List since 1989, and it has been contaminating the Fort Hall Reservation since that time.

Hanson said there's groundwater contamination as it flows up into the Portneuf River in the surface water. There is some contamination that continues from the J.R. Simplot plant next door. Air quality has been impacted — of that contamination that's in the air falls down onto the plants and the soils on the Fort Hall Reservation. After 30 years of the FMC and Simplot plants listed on the National Priority List,



Environmental Waste Management Program intern Sidney Fellows speaks about traditional plant gathering at the annual Shoshonean Reunion on August 6. (Lori Ann Edmo photos)

they're still not cleaned up. "And anybody that has worked in Superfund knows that it is a regulatory nightmare, and it continues to go on and on. And we continue to fight to ensure that the regulatory agencies take into consideration the tribes, the tribal risk scenarios, and the specific tribal impacts from those," she said, because some of the Western risk assessments don't look at specifics that impact you and your communities.

She said the connection is the waste at the FMC operable unit that originated at the Gay Mine was processed by FMC and is now being stored at ponds at the FMC site and those ponds are leaking into the groundwater. They generate phosphine gas from the elemental phosphorous and that gas leaks into the soils and it is being processed. The gas is extracted and try to run it over carbons to make it a little less toxic but it's not. "And these sites are going to remain contaminating this land well into our grandchildren's lifetime and their grandchildren's. In my opinion, these ponds need to be excavated. They need to be dug out. The waste needs to be treated. At least that will help," she continued.

She showed slides of the Southeast Idaho mining patch that leaves huge pits. The Tribes works with the Forest Service on the North and South Mabey mines and ask them to take down the high walls. They ask them to take into consideration when doing risk assessments the use of the land by Native people. "If there is no risk, there is no cleanup — that is what the companies would like," she said. "If they can keep tribal members out of these sites there's no

receptors and they don't have to clean up." Another site has selenium, it oxidizes and becomes very toxic. At the Gay Mine, EWMP continues to get the high walls taken down. There's groundwater contamination, surface water contamination and there's vegetation high in metal.

Hansen said concerning Native American risk scenarios it's important to make sure any agency that is doing cleanup on your land or next to your land need to take into consideration how you use that land because if not, you're not being protected. "We have to continue to negotiate with the companies to take into consideration how much elk is eaten or how many fish are eaten. And to recognize tribal members not only use this land, they need to take into consideration how often tribal members are in these locations so they can fully practice their treaty rights. It's not what agencies want to hear," she said.

Sidney Fellows, an EWMP intern, talked about traditional plant gathering on and off the reservation and how it's impacted by mining contaminants. She's learning more about mining history and is working on a culturally significant plant list with 46 species through knowledge gained at the Tribal Museum. The list helps EWMP determine what plants to check for mining contaminants. She showed a slide that lists the plants by the common name, the plants being used in different ways, whether used for inhalation, ingestion, etc. For example, cedar would be inhalation such as inhaling with smoke. Are you eating berries, what plants are you using as our bodies are being exposed to the

plants. The list is one-part EWMP is making an effort to prioritize tribal needs, values — they're expanding and updating it.

In addition, Fellows said they are asking tribal members who harvest plants where they are harvesting, what are Shoshone and Bannock names of plants and they're working with the Language and Culture Preservation Department on the research project. Research questions include: What ancestral foods, medicines or other plant materials are gathered today by Shoshone-Bannock tribal members on or off reservation? What are the Shoshone and Bannock names? How, if at all do Shoshone-Bannock tribal members who gather plants experience mining contaminants from Gay Mine or Eastern Michaud Flats while exercising traditional plant practices on their ancestral homelands? What changes, if any, should the EWMP make with respect to their communication of mining-related information to the tribal community? What changes if any, should the EWMP make with respect to their monitoring to more fully account for all tribal practices related to the gathering of plants and/or their products (such as berries)?

Fellows explained preliminary findings are that additional plants will be placed on the culturally sensitive plant list noting Shoshone names are most often communicated. People have adapted or are adapting when harvesting such as moving harvesting sites and they're trusting the medicine in the plant is greater than the contaminants. The community needs to continue to engage with contaminant



Nathan Small talks about work the tribes have done with the U.S. government.

issues and speak out.

Former Fort Hall Business Council Chairman Nathan Small said as former leader, the Tribes have been working for years to get the U.S. government, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Simplot, FMC and the Bureau of Land Management to get things taken care of. "Every year try to get the companies to say 'let's do something about this,' the original documents you signed you said you would reclaim, you'd put back together, they've done things here and there but it's still causing a lot of issues," he said. There's a lot of contamination of the ground, water, wood such as the trees and when doing the study, they're trying to figure out how much of the medicinal plants, the food we eat is contaminated. The trees being gathered for shade for use at the Festival grounds and Sundance — when you bring these things into your ceremonies, just how much is contaminated? How much is going to hurt you? But our prayers our still protecting us, he said. Frustration was expressed about various administrators from EPA, BLM have come out to the rez visiting the various sites, say they're going to fix things and never return.

Bureau of Indian Affairs has a responsibility to the landowners but where are they? He talked about when a new presidential administration comes in, every four years the Tribes have to re-educate them on the issues. Small said it's a major fight with the companies — especially for leadership to push these people to get them to do things. "Very frustrating — promises made by the white man — it don't happen until you force them," he continued. He said the Tribes are doing what they can but environmental is not having happy times. "We need to hang in there and even have the Congressional folks helping us — they been doing what they can." They can't get the companies, bureaus to get things done as the EWMP deals with all the mines — off the rez, in salmon country, in gathering areas, in the elk hunting area, in our treaty all the unoccupied lands of the United States. It's unfortunate there's about 30 Superfund sites between here and the Yellowstone corridor — there's issues with gas, uranium, gold and unfortunately, we have phosphate. He's glad he was able to express frustrations about the issue.

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