

By Ramona Gault

CHURCH ROCK, N.M.

ONLY A GLIMMER OF WATER FLOWS IN THE Rio Puerco these dry, dusty summer days. Navajos living along the river on the Arizona-New Mexico state line tend their sheep, goats, cows and horses as they have for generations, leading them to sparse patches of grass and hauling water for them. It's a land of red rock mesas, pickup trucks, picture-postcard sunsets and harsh realities.

Realities like nuclear contamination.

On July 16 about 200 of the area Navajos gathered here to chant, dance and remember an event that the rest of the nation has forgotten: the nation's largest-ever accidental spill of radioactive materials.

Ten years ago on that date an earthen dam at a uranium mill near Church Rock collapsed, sending a 94-million-gallon soup of radioactive materials and toxic chemicals down the Rio Puerco more than 100 miles into Arizona.

The yellowish, muddy effluent was acidic enough (1.5 pH) to produce burns on the legs of animals caught in it. The spill also contained various isotopes of uranium, radium, polonium, bismuth, radon, thorium and lead, as well as arsenic, selenium and other heavy metals.

In the weeks after the spill, government agencies erected signs along the river in English, Spanish and Navajo warning people not to drink the water or let animals drink it. The federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) advised residents not to eat the organs of their livestock. And the mill owner, United Nuclear Corp. (UNC), based in An-

Navajos inherit a legacy of radiation

napolis, Md., scraped the top three inches or so of sediment from the riverbed to clean up the radioactive and toxic substances.

Now, 10 years later, the warning signs along the river are gone, fallen to vandals and desert winds. UNC, which shut down the Church Rock mill in the early '80s after the

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price of uranium dropped precipitously, contends that their cleanup of the riverbed was adequate. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) agrees.

But for the 10,000 Navajos living along the Rio Puerco, the spill has left a legacy of uncertainty about the safety of their water—already a scarce resource in this semiarid land. In the past couple of years, the U.S. Geological Survey and a New Mexico environmental group have discovered that radioactivity levels in the Rio Puerco at times are up to 100 times over Arizona's maximum allowable limits for drinking water.

Federal and state officials, as well as environmentalists, tend to agree that the 10-year-old spill is not solely to blame for the high radioactivity levels in the river today. Decades of uranium mining and natural radioactivity present in the rock formations also have contributed, they say.

But the persistence of radioactivity in the

Rio Puerco illustrates how intractable environmental pollution can be. And the Navajo, denied use of a scarce natural resource, must learn how to come to terms with the pollution of their land.

Unlike the residents of Three Mile Island, Pa., many Rio Puerco residents didn't even know what radiation was. "Since we don't have a word for it, we had to try to explain what it does," said Ray Morgan, a Navajo who works in a community education project for Southwest Research and Information Center, an Albuquerque environmental group.

Invisible enemy: Since they couldn't see, taste or feel radiation, many of the illiterate, rural Navajos couldn't believe they could be harmed by the water, Morgan said.

But they saw what happened to their livestock after the spill. There are many stories about deformed lambs that died soon after birth, as well as the death of adult animals.

The CDC studied tissue of the Navajos' livestock and reported in 1980 that the Puerco residents were getting "higher than normal" radiation doses, but that it wasn't a significant health threat.

The low-income, rural Navajos had been using water from the Rio Puerco for decades—as had the uranium mining companies. Before mining started in the '50s, the Puerco had been an ephemeral stream, flowing only when fed by snowmelt or thun-

derstorms. The water was far from pristine; it contained lots of sediment and an unknown amount of radioactive material from the region's uranium-bearing rocks.

Beginning in the '50s, the river ran almost continuously with wastewater discharged from uranium mines upstream. The mines lay in the Grants Belt, a swath across New Mexico that may be the most polluted uranium-producing area in the U.S.

Before New Mexico established water standards for the mines in 1977, some mines (not UNC's) dumped untreated wastewater directly into the Puerco. Selenium, radium and uranium were among the contaminants. During those years, no one told the Navajos that the river might not be safe.

In 1983 the EPA discovered that contaminants were leaching into groundwater at UNC's Church Rock mill site. The agency put the site on its Superfund list, and, since then, the EPA and Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), which licenses the mill, have been wrangling over details of a cleanup of the mine site.

A tough call: Gary Konwinski, a geohydrologist with the NRC in Denver, said he thinks UNC will be able to finish its \$25 million cleanup at the site by about 1996. But neither the NRC nor the EPA is taking any action on radioactive contamination in the Puerco and nearby groundwater.

"Anything lost on the Puerco years ago is indistinguishable from what's there now," Konwinski said. "The best scientists couldn't come to a decision on what's there now."

The EPA decided in 1988 that it couldn't determine how much of the Puerco's contamination comes from mining activities and how much from natural conditions. "The tendency is to pin blame on UNC and the spill. That's not true," said Bill Rowe, who manages the UNC cleanup for the EPA in Dallas.

UNC also considers the matter closed. For a few months after the spill, the company trucked in water for Navajos who requested it. In 1985, UNC paid about \$550,000 to some 240 Navajo plaintiffs to settle a lawsuit over the spill. Dick Lange, general counsel for UNC, said in an interview, "The view of the EPA, NRC, EID [New Mexico Environmental Improvement Division], National Institutes of Health and other agencies is that it was adequately cleaned up years ago."

But Chris Shuey, an environmental specialist with Southwest Research and Information Center, said the radioactive particles from mine releases and from the spill may have seeped deeper into the riverbed than anyone suspected. When storm runoff churns up the sediment, the radioactive material comes to the surface, producing the high radioactivity readings that his group and the U.S. Geological Survey are getting with their tests.

Uncertainty over where it is safe to drill wells keeps the area Navajos from developing their scarce water resources, Shuey says.

The Navajos' only choices are trucking in water from distant reservation wells or letting their animals drink from the Puerco. For many, community water systems are either unavailable or prohibitively expensive.

"This is the groundwater of the Navajo who live there, not of the technicians who live in Denver," said Shuey, who has been working with the Navajo for 10 years. "The people who live there, not a dime has been spent on their interests."

Ramona Gault is a Santa Fe, N.M., writer.

A five-year government study may spill some answers

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) has begun a five-year study that could answer some of the Navajos' questions. The agency plans to develop a profile of the contamination along the Puerco-Little Colorado river system, including a health risk assessment, says John Gray, the USGS hydrologist who is leading the \$3.4 million study.

"Virtually every time the rivers flow, they exceed the Arizona maximum allowable limits on gross alpha and beta radiation by over 100 times," Gray said in an interview.

Alpha is a high-energy, low-penetration radiation that can be stopped by skin, whereas beta radiation can penetrate several inches. Their chief danger comes from being ingested, Gray explained. "You don't want to breathe, eat or drink them" so that they get into vital organs and bone marrow, he said.

Among the radioactive materials being found in the river sediment are isotopes of thorium, radium and uranium. Thorium-230 has been connected with lymphatic system ailments, including cancers, and radium is a known carcinogen. Uranium is highly toxic, affecting the kidneys and liver.

The USGS plans to determine where the radioactivity came from by dating sediments, evaluating flood deposits and taking ratios of isotopes. "We believe a lot of the clues are out there," Gray said.

Both New Mexico and Arizona are contributing money to the study, and Arizona

water officials are outspoken in their concerns about the Puerco, which flows into the Little Colorado in their state. "We've had continuous violations of state water quality standards since the spill," said Ed Swanson, program manager for surface water quality in the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality. The residues of radioactive particles and toxic elements are working their way down the river channel, he said in an interview.

The USGS study will help "define the problem in a scientifically defensible manner," Swanson says. "Then we can develop controls to deal with it."

Other than monitoring by the USGS and the Southwest Research and Information Center, the Puerco Navajos have received little help with their water problems. They live on the eastern edge of the vast Navajo nation, in a region known as the "checkerboard" because land is split into parcels owned alternately by the tribe, New Mexico and the federal government.

Some say they are considered a marginal part of the reservation because of this land ownership arrangement. The tribal government, beset with a leadership crisis, has been unresponsive to their requests for a public water supply, according to Ray Morgan of Southwest Research.

For the past 10 years, the Navajos of the Puerco have tried to cope with a situation many feel confused about. Donna Deyhle, an anthropologist writing in the May 19, 1982, issue of *Century* magazine, noted that instead of blaming their prob-

lems on the mining industry, many older Navajos instead blamed themselves for allowing their land to be desecrated. She wrote: "This is perhaps the greatest tragedy of the Church Rock spill, that elderly Navajos feel guilty and assume the blame for a situation totally beyond their control."

"Some people are still reluctant to talk about the spill because they lost livestock that was their livelihood," said Morgan. "They're more emotionally attached to their animals than white people are."

But a change in attitude may have begun. Southwest Research has been conducting an education project among the Puerco Navajos for the past five years, working with residents and community leaders on water quality concerns.

At the July 16 commemoration, these Puerco residents announced the formation of the Puerco Valley Navajo Clean Water Association. The event was a day of socializing, dancing and grass-roots politicking over clean water. The association plans next to start lobbying tribal and state government officials for a public water supply.

"People affected are now realizing that they would like to take this action and keep this as a public issue," said Jimson Joe, a co-chairman of the association. "Navajos were never taught what the results [of mining] would be. We rely on water, on our sheep, horses and cows. It's our basic livelihood."

—R.G.

By Salim Muwakkil

JESSE JACKSON'S RECENT MOVE TO WASHINGTON, D.C., was yet another step along the political tightrope he's been walking most of his public life. Hanging in the balance, as usual, is his credibility.

He risks rejection and ridicule if he campaigns to succeed beleaguered D.C. Mayor Marion Barry and loses. If he wins, Jackson risks his beloved itinerancy and freelance political prerogatives. And if he doesn't run for mayor, he risks fueling speculation that he was chased from Chicago because recent election results—in which his candidates lost—showcased his political vulnerabilities.

With his pingpong shifts of headquarters from Washington to Chicago and back again, Jackson also risks alienating those members of the National Rainbow Coalition (NRC) who finally may be tiring of his caprices. Running a campaign for mayor of Washington, D.C., is nowhere in the NRC's list of agenda items, but many members fear the organization again will be preoccupied by yet another of Jackson's electoral efforts.

And even members who favor a D.C. mayoral run are angered that Jackson has made few attempts to fill them in on his intentions. "Jesse treats members of the Rainbow just like the Democratic Party treats African-American voters: he takes us for granted," said one disgruntled NRC official.

Rainbow blues: But this is old news. Since an NRC board meeting last March approved structural realignments, the group has been moving further away from membership empowerment and from holding leaders accountable. More and more the organization reflects the personal choices of Jackson, and the March meeting forged a restructuring that eliminates even the pretense of member democracy. Instead, the board instituted a conventional top-down alignment that allows the national president to appoint most of the NRC's leaders.

"From the reports I hear, many people are upset about the content of the [March] decisions and trying to sort out what it will mean for their local work," wrote NRC board member Leslie Cagan in the May 1989 edition of *Zeta* magazine. "Commitments to Jesse Jackson and his presidential efforts are being weighed against commitments to building a mass membership organization where people can play an active role in setting the agenda and doing the work."

Not everyone is unhappy with the direction Jackson and the Rainbow seem to be taking, however. Some NRC supporters welcome the two-time presidential candidate's move to Washington as part of a natural evolution. "Jesse has to grow and reach out to other people, and we who respect him and understand his gifts must allow him that freedom," explained Robert Starks, a Chicago organizer and Jackson confidant.

Echoing and amplifying that view is Ron Daniels, who, as former NRC executive director, also has worked closely with Jackson. "As Jesse continues to look at expanding his base," Daniels noted, "several things are required. First, he needs to address the lingering question about his lack of government experience, and a term as mayor in the capital city would take care of that. And, even if he doesn't run, his relocation to D.C.—a media center and a major stop for international leadership—strikes me as an excellent move."

In Daniels' view, Jackson has one more credible shot at the presidency, and that should wait until 1996. "I don't think it's tac-



Jesse Jackson's big move: inside the beltway but out of the loop.

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Is Jesse running? No, he's just walking the tightrope

tically wise to run for president in 1992; history teaches us that incumbents are extremely difficult to dislodge," he said. "I think Jesse should take the time to build a record based on effective public policy service."

And, Daniels added, as mayor of D.C., Jackson's stature would attract extraordinary talent to his administration and, with the world watching, allow him to make a positive difference.

Joy in the mainstream: Despite those expressions of support, it's safe to say that most of Jackson's left constituency is decidedly uneasy about his new directions. Mainstream pundits, on the other hand, seem absolutely entranced by the possibilities. Perhaps the biggest booster of a Jackson candidacy are prominent Democrats. And why not? After all, a D.C. mayoral campaign would take the pesky Jackson out of the presidential sweepstakes and allow the party to field candidates without his distorting influence.

Ever astute, Jackson's coy denials of mayoral aspirations seem designed to manipulate the party's anxiety about his intentions. "I have been trying to move to Washington, D.C., since 1984," he joked in response to a reporter's question at a recent news conference. "I was hoping to get to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but surely it's progress to get to 16th Street, where we're moving."

Although Jackson said he was moving for the sake of the NRC, he occasionally hinted that he has more in mind. "The Rainbow will be far more effective with its base of operations in the nation's capital," he explained. But he added, "If we cannot save our children, build good schools, safe streets and a thriving economy in Washington, D.C., there is no hope for urban America."

Yet even as speculation increases that

Jackson is readying himself for a mayoral run, he is putting the finishing touches on the Keep Hope Alive political action committee (PAC) he created after his 1988 campaign to help finance future candidacies. Indeed, the Jackson forces have learned much about fundraising techniques since their candidate's initial run in 1984. According to a story in the September edition of *Chicago* magazine, the campaign was raising nearly \$800,000 a month by March 1988—an amount more than four times the 1984 rate.

Jesse, call home: The Jackson faction's increased focus on sophisticated fundraising techniques and other mainstream pursuits have provoked growing concern that Jack-

Jackson has moved his base to Washington. But is he getting closer to the White House or to the D.C. mayor's office?

son himself is deserting the activist causes of his civil rights roots. "The rumor of the corporate sellout Jesse Jackson is an old one that gets trotted out every time he notches up his level of expertise," Starks explained.

But complaints about Jackson's unilateral decision-making and lack of accountability are becoming too numerous to dismiss. Although most NRC members are slow to criticize a man they still hold in high esteem, harsh appraisals of Jackson are more commonplace these days.

"We haven't heard anything from the national office, so we really don't know what's

going on," said Liz Blum, co-chair of the Vermont Rainbow Coalition, one of the country's most active NRC chapters. "The things that I've heard and read about Jesse's activities—lending support to various labor actions around the country—have been wonderful, but I only know about them through the media. In our state there is an incredible amount of interest in Jackson's activities in the name of the NRC, but we don't know what's up. They don't stay in touch."

Blum said the national office could expand its scope if it more regularly focused on issues of local import. "For example, we're in a big struggle over the economic and ecological implications of bovine growth hormone, a genetically engineered product that is being pushed by chemical companies as a boon to beef and milk production. If Jesse would speak out on this issue, his national visibility would raise the level of debate." As it is, Blum complained, "we haven't had an opportunity to even discuss this with the Rainbow's national leadership."

Like many NRC members, Blum is not anxious to hurl blanket criticisms at Jackson. She credits him with moving the left agenda forward in this country. Still, she said the NRC is squandering an ideal opportunity to build on the strength of the 1988 campaign and may be left out in the process. "Unfortunately, Jackson is giving the impression that he is ignoring the left," Blum said. "We were the troops of his campaign, and now it seems he doesn't need us. Consequently, I'm hearing more talk about a third-party movement."

But Jackson's top advisers have calculated the options and decided that the risk of left defections is a small one. "Many of those protesting Jesse's mainstreaming moves are people who think that marginality is a value in itself," said Daniels, the former NRC director. "They are wrong, of course."

Jackson has spent most of his years in the political margins, and there's little doubt he much prefers action in the mainstream. But his walk along the political high wire between left activism and mainstream sophistication shows he still likes to hedge his bets. □

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