



## Deadly water

**Black Falls: Water sources, but none to drink**

*Second in a three-part series*



Larry Tohannie fills a water jug along with his wife Rolanda at Box Springs in Black Falls, Ariz. A sign near the well indicates that water from the well is undrinkable, but due to their distance from clean water, the Tohannie's have little choice but to drink it.. — © 2009 Gallup Independent / Brian Leddy

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By Kathy Helms  
Diné Bureau

BLACK FALLS, Ariz. — The Navajo Nation has weathered severe drought conditions for about the last 20 years, so when a water source presents itself, the last thing usually considered is whether it might be contaminated.

“Water is precious,” said Eleanor Peshlakai, 67, of Black Falls. “Last year I was hauling water in my truck during the middle of a real dry spell. As I was filling up at a water trough, some of the water sprayed out from the hose and out of nowhere the lizards came running. They were thirsty.

They, too, are suffering the drought, just like the humans, waiting for any form of moisture.”

Peshlakai used to haul water from Box Spring, a source now posted for uranium contamination by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Last year, EPA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sampled approximately 250 unregulated water sources and found 22 of those exceeded drinking water standards for radionuclides. Four are in the Black Falls area.

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Lillie Lane from Navajo Nation EPA and Zoe Heller from U.S. EPA spent weeks posting warning signs at springs and livestock watering points, and along with representatives of the DINEH Project conducted outreach at impacted chapters.

Despite their efforts, word apparently has not trickled down to residents in some of the more isolated areas of the reservation. Don Yellowman and Marsha Monteresky of the Forgotten People said they have documented at least 14 families in the area of Box Spring alone that are still using uranium-contaminated water for personal consumption.

### **Not safe to drink**

Rolanda and Larry Tohannie live near Box Spring and continue to utilize the bad water. They did not know it was contaminated until recently when they went to fill up the gallon water jugs they carry in the trunk of their car.

Since they do not have a pickup, they get water from the pipe that feeds the livestock troughs rather than pulling into the water station and loading 55-gallon barrels from the overhead pipe. It was only by accident that Larry stumbled on the metal warning sign embedded in concrete.

"Water from this well is not safe to drink," the sign states.

"This water has been tested and found to exceed Navajo EPA and U.S. EPA human drinking water standards for uranium or other contaminants. Navajo Nation policy is that livestock-use-only wells are not to be used for human drinking water."

Rolanda, 46, has lived in the Box Spring area off and on since she was 5 years old and grew up drinking the water.

Now, she and Larry have a permanent home just a few hundred yards from the house where she was raised by her grandparents.

"Twenty-five years ago I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

They gave me radiation and now I'm taking medication, which I have to take for life. I need to go back to the clinic to get my blood drawn again so they can regulate my thyroid.

I don't have any thyroid, so it's just replacements," she said.

"About 13 to 15 years ago I was going into the hospital in Phoenix and I had really bad acid reflux. I just kept throwing up. I didn't know what it was from. They told me that I had esophagus cancer. It was at the very first stages, so now it's what they say, in remission."

She has a sister who has been diagnosed with stomach cancer, she said.

"Larry has heart problems and the doctors told him it's not possible he can do heavy work. He just doesn't have the strength to do it any more. So we're just taking care of one another the best way we can. We don't have reliable transportation and water is right near there, so we just run down there and get the water."

At first, Rolanda was frustrated, she said. "Now I'm just like, 'OK, I don't think anybody can do anything.' There's people that come down with their children and they carry buckets and put it into the barrels every day, day and night. I know people that drink it and give it to the cattle," she said, lifting a dead frog out of the trough with a stick.

Nina Tohannie, Rolanda's sister-in-law, understands her feeling of frustration. "That's the feeling that probably set in 15 to 20 years ago, at least for me. ... At that time I was really voicing what I thought and felt – people just come in and they study us and then they leave and there's no return.

"Now, people are advocating for us and that helps. Hopefully somewhere, somehow they can come together and realize that it is an emergency situation. It's a public health issue," she said.

### **Grassroots**

The Forgotten People grassroots organization was awarded a \$20,000 Environmental Justice grant from U.S. EPA earlier this year and has been using the money to identify solutions, such as getting exterior elevated water tanks for Black Falls families that do not have access to piped water.

"I think it is very important that we do not just complain," Nina said. "We need to go forward and help other communities have safe clean drinking water. We need to replicate what was done here in the Black Falls community.

Now we need a water truck, well maintained roads and access to safe, clean and affordable drinking water."

Clancy Tenley of U.S. EPA said his agency's goal has been to find wells that may be contaminated with uranium, sample them, post them if they are contaminated, and do public outreach. Additionally, EPA is trying to find alternative sources of water for residents in impacted areas.

"Together with Indian Health Service we are constructing new water sources in Black Falls, Monument Valley, Dennehotso and also Sweetwater. These are projects that are now in line for funding," he said. The projects will serve families in the vicinity of contaminated wells so they have an alternative without driving long distances.

EPA also has invited the Navajo Nation to apply for five water

trucks to do water-hauling pilot projects. "We hope to get funding to Navajo Department of Water Resources in the fall and they may be able to select this area and other areas like it on the reservation for this pilot water-hauling project," Tenley said.

"We are going to test approximately 100 more wells this fall in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control. We'll be sampling some wells that we were not able to get to last time because they were frozen or it was too muddy to get in.

We'll sample in the area where CDC did their study, and then we'll do a few in the area of homes located really close to mines."

EPA Superfund officials have visited area residents three times in the past year – something virtually unheard of among most federal agencies.

"We were there the day Katherine Peshlakai turned on her faucet," Tenley said. "It was very inspiring to us."

Last August they met with area residents for about eight hours. "Every single person said the same thing. They said, 'The roads are not good, there's no power, but what we really want is water,'" he said.

"I was so thankful that there is somebody that is down here that really cares," Rolanda said. "We need good, safe drinking water to maybe let us live like five to 10 years longer. If they can't pave the road, then just grade it. It's terrible out here."

***TUESDAY: Remote family makes 20 gallons of fresh drinking water last two to three weeks.***

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