

NIEHS delegation tours study sites in New Mexico

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., toured NIEHS-funded study sites March 15-16 on a Native American reservation, Laguna Pueblo, and at an abandoned uranium mill near Milan, N.M. She and Mary Gant, NIEHS Program Analyst, were the guests of [Johnnye Lewis, Ph.D.](http://hsc.unm.edu/pharmacy/science/JohnnyeLewis.shtml), (<http://hsc.unm.edu/pharmacy/science/JohnnyeLewis.shtml>) professor and director of the Community Environmental Health Program at the University of New Mexico (UNM).

Lewis has been involved in health projects with Native Americans in northwest New Mexico since 1991. She currently has funding from NIEHS to study the impact of chronic uranium exposure on kidney function, and from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to study the effects of uranium exposure on pregnancies, birth outcomes, and development of children.

In conversations with community representatives, including the vice president of the Navajo Nation, Birnbaum briefly described the NIEHS vision, mission, current research activities, and the new five-year strategic plan. She emphasized the importance of continuing relationships with Native American communities as one of the most important elements of the plan.

As an example of ongoing interest at NIEHS in Native American environmental health issues, Birnbaum pointed to the December 2012 webinar on “Environmental Justice: A Native American Perspective,” which attracted more participants than any other NIEHS webinar. “Protecting our health means protecting our environment,” she said. “Clean air, clean water, and clean land are essential to preventing disease.”

Birnbaum and Gant observed reclamation efforts intended to reduce exposures for residents. They also heard from community members about high concentrations of uranium in surface water immediately downstream.

Other pollutants detected in the area include arsenic, barium, chromium, cobalt, copper, lead, manganese, vanadium, selenium, and zinc. The Laguna people have asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to declare the area a Superfund site.

The NIEHS delegation spent its final day, March 18, at UNM with NIEHS-funded researchers discussing current projects.

Earlier activities supported by NIEHS include uranium education at the Navajo Nation Dine College, and the Dine Network for Environmental Health study that the Eastern Navajo Health Board requested, because of concern over exposure to uranium in drinking water. Its goal was to build community research capacity and study community health.



Birnbaum listened to community leaders, such as Laguna guide Larry Lente, right, a thirty-year Marine veteran and former mineworker. (Photo courtesy of Mary Gant)



Unlike community meetings in urban areas, a meeting on the reservation took place on a gravel lot adjacent to the Northeast Church Rock Mine in the Red Water Pond Road community. (Photo courtesy of Mary Gant)



The former Jackpile-Paguate Uranium Mine on the Laguna Pueblo, 40 miles west of Albuquerque, shows the results of typical remediation efforts, which consisted of covering mine waste and contouring to reduce erosion. However, runoff from the site pollutes water downstream. (Photo courtesy of Mary Gant)

The Environmental Factor is produced monthly by the [National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences \(NIEHS\)](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/) (<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/>), Office of Communications and Public Liaison. The content is not copyrighted, and it can be reprinted without permission. If you use parts of Environmental Factor in your publication, we ask that you provide us with a copy for our records. We welcome your [comments and suggestions](#). (bruskec@niehs.nih.gov)

This page URL: <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/news/newsletter/2013/5/spotlight-delegation/index.htm>

NIEHS website: <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/>

Email the Web Manager at webmanager@niehs.nih.gov