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Seneca president calls for removal of all West Valley wastes

By RICK MILLER, Olean Times Herald

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Seneca singers Darlene Spruce and Nicky Thompson entertain a group of about 60 people participating in a Round Dance at the Buffalo History Museum's Indigenous People's Day program Tuesday.

BUFFALO — Seneca Nation President Todd Gates called Tuesday for the removal of all nuclear waste at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

Gates, who is a member of the West Valley Citizens Task Force, spoke at the Buffalo History Museum at an Indigenous Peoples Day program. The program was hosted by the Indigenous Women's Initiative, The Western New York Peace Center and the Buffalo History Museum.

Gates read a proclamation from the Seneca Tribal Council recognizing Indigenous Peoples Day and a Nuclear Free Future.

“Indigenous Peoples Day recognizes the important contributions of our ancestors to what is now North America,” Gates said. “This year’s celebration also honors the ten-year anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”

In talking about nuclear wastes upstream from the Cattaraugus Territory, Gates reminded the roughly 60-person audience that “we rent this land” and it is our responsibility to pass it on to future generations.

The question is, he said, “Where are we going to put it (nuclear waste)?”

Gates also touched on climate change.

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“We need to wrap our minds around climate change. It is a responsibility not only to ourselves, but to the world in general,” he said.

Another speaker, Lynda Schneekloth of Interfaith Climate Justice, noted the West Valley plant extracted plutonium from spent nuclear fuel rods from 1966 to 1972. It left liquid radioactive waste that has since been solidified, but the main process plant, underground tanks and two low-level waste landfills remain.

“We don’t have any idea of what to do with it,” she added.

Gates was quick to note that Indian territories have often been targeted for nuclear waste disposal or storage sites.

“We believe the property belongs to the future,” said Agnes Williams, coordinator of the Indigenous Women’s Initiatives. She said areas of the country, often on Indian reservations, have been sacrificed for the mining of uranium ore and for waste disposal.

People are needed to help on the environmental impact statement of the next phase of the cleanup at West Valley, Williams said.

Later, outside the museum, Gates said he is very concerned about a probabilistic assessment underway on the possibility of leaving some wastes buried in the ground at West Valley. These wastes have a half life of 10,000 years, he said.

“We want a full cleanup,” the Seneca president told reporters. “Where are we going to put it? It is disproportionately aligned with native lands. We have to fight for what is ours.”

In his role as a member of the West Valley Citizens Task Force, Gates said the Department of Energy “has an opportunity to make an example of this place (West Valley). Show them what it takes to contain it. It’s going to take billions.”

Gates said the Department of Energy had cut the annual West Valley cleanup funding from more than \$100 million to \$63 million, drawing out the cleanup process.

“We want it out of there. Let’s get it out of there,” he said.

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