Native people are not the only ones after the federal goverment because of health problems caused by radiation poisoning. The 250,000-member Alliance of Atomic Veterans say that 98 percent of their radiation-related medical claims have been denied by the Veterans Administration — although the government admits that it sent them marching into mushroom clouds in early nuclear weapons tests.

"The U.S. government took 250,000 atomic veterans — like they were sacrificial lambs — and laid them on the altar of the nuclear age," said AAV director Anthony Guarisco, who organized a Veterans Day memorial in the foothills of the Nevada Test Site's rugged terrain. "Over this hill is our monument, the example of man's inhumanity to man." Guarisco said that those veterans who are still alive today say that the government can't be trusted on anything to do with nuclear power, weapons testing or uranium extraction.

ECONOMIC BLACKMAIL

By all accounts, life on Indian reservations is bleak in comparison to the way the average American lives. Mortality rates are high, often from diseases that are readily cured with adequate medical attention, the educational system suffers by comparison with inner-city schools and joblessness and poverty are endemic. According to the federal census, 34.1% of the Mescalero Apache live in poverty, while the rate is an astounding 45.5% for the Navajo. Even many conservatives agree that much of the blame lies with the federal government. "I cannot think of any area where the Federal Government has so completely abdicated its responsibility as it has in Indian affairs," Senator Dennis DeConcini of Arizona told the *New York Times*.

In this context, the offer of hundreds of thousands of dollars simply to undertake some studies is irresistable, especially for tribal governments not well known for their incorruptibility or accountability to their constituents. But, say activists, even if there was perfect democracy in Native nations, the MRS proposals that target tribes with huge economic incentives for accepting cancer-causing radioactive waste is nothing short of "economic blackmail." The idea of accepting fast cash in exchange for the long-term poisoning of Mother Earth is outrageous to many people who have struggled for a lifetime to protect Native lands and rights. "We can't look at this for short-term monetary gains. We have to balance that with long-term health dangers. It's an issue of survival for Native people," said Thorpe, who organized her tribe to withdraw from the MRS program.

Thorpe was instrumental in crafting language for a "No Nuclear Waste on Indian Lands" resolution unanimously passed by some 400 delegates who attended the third annual Indigenous Environmental Network gathering in Celilo Village, Oregon in June. The resolution implores the 16 tribal MRS applicants to withdraw their proposals because "there is no safe method to dispose of nuclear waste and the federal government has ruined enough of our land." Delegates spoke of the increased risk of cancer and genetic deformities that will threaten future generations of children and Mother Earth.

One thing that anti-MRS activists have going in their favor is an already strong movement among Indian people to fight an invasion of toxic waste merchants anxious to find ways to get rid of America's garbage (see "Protecting Mother Earth" in the Fall 1991 *Minority Trendsletter*). The Indigenous Environmental Network is the result of a dramatic upsurge in activism on Native land due to these local fights — which often are as much against corrupt tribal governments as against the waste companies themselves.

FIGHTS OVER TOXICS LEAD TO MORE ACCOUNTABLE LEADERSHIP

Groups such as Diné CARE, the Indigenous Environmental Network, the Good Road Coalition, the Native Resource Coalition, Indigenous Peoples Alliance, Native Action, Native Americans for a Clean Environment and the Columbia River Defense Fund are working to educate Indian communities about the hazards of nuclear waste.

Many of these grassroots groups, and scores of others in Indian country, were formed after local people learned that their tribal governments were considering or had signed agreements to accept waste deals or intrusive economic development projects that would pollute Indian lands. Often, traditional Indian people and elders have been at a distinct disadvantage because of language barriers and a lack of knowledge about the high-tech waste industry. For example, the Diné language does not have words to describe deadly toxins that technology has enable society to produce.

So when Waste Tech, Inc. courted the small, isolated Navajo community of Dilkon, Arizona in 1989 with a $35 million-dollar deal that promised 175 jobs in a town with 75% unemployment, the offer seemed too good to be true. Community members, many of whom speak only Navajo, could not foresee any problems with the company spokesman described a facility that would innocuously "burn trash and bury the ashes," said Jane Yazzie, a respected elder who was promised a two-story house and "lots of money" to endorse the deal.

In fact, the seemingly harmless 100-acre project was a high-level toxic waste incinerator and landfill that would have seriously threatened the health of the community and its meager water supply, according to George Joe, a University of Arizona biochemistry major who was instrumental in explaining to his elders the threat posed by toxins.

Although local tribal officials had signed resolutions supporting the incinerator, people in the community ousted their elected representatives and defeated the project. Out of that fight, Diné CARE was born. In 1990,. they hosted the first "Protecting Mother Earth" gathering in Dilkon, which was attended by some 200 delegates. Since then, the indigenous environmental movement has grown dramatically into an international network, dubbed the Indigenous Environmental Network. It is comprised tribal nations from the Arctic to the Amazon. The 1992 IEN gathering on the banks of the Columbia River at Celilo Village, Oregon was attended by 500 participants, many of whom were organizing against a virtual invasion of hazardous waste disposal companies that have picked Native land as their newest target for disposal facilities. IEN's 1993 conference, planned for Oklahoma, is expected to attract even more participants, especially in light of the uproar over MRS.

Native environmental groups, although separated by geography and often language, are united through a common reverence for Mother Earth and a spiritual connection to the land that runs deeper than in most mainstream environmental groups. Sacred ceremonies are often an integral part of the battle to rescue Native communities from the merchants of waste. Native organizers call on these traditions and often rely on the wisdom and respect for traditional elders, who have long memories of other fights to defend the land from invaders.

This is especially true when it is sacred areas that are threatened. Recently, Diné CARE spearheaded a successful campaign (with the support of the current Navajo government) to beat back a plan to build a 160-acre asbestos landfill that was to be located near Huerfano Mountain in New Mexico. Huerfano is sacred territory to the Navajo. After months of fights and negotiations, Navajo Nation president Peterson Zah announced in early January that Insulation Contractors, Unlimited had agreed to abandon its plans for the dump. He took special care to acknowledge the work of the environmentalists: "We thank Diné CARE and especially the local people for their help in winning this victory for the Navajo people," he said. "This shows that the Navajo people are committed to protecting our sacred areas, and our strong opposition should put everyone on notice that the Navajo Nation is not a dumping ground for hazardous waste."

As this example shows, the original fight to protect the health of the community led to a more accountable and responsive leadership, which has made it easier to win other fights. Some Native activists say that in the long run, changes in tribal governments as a result of environmental fights might have larger positive repercussions than the "wins" over waste dumps, MRS or other threats to the ecology. In the meantime, however, the struggle over MRS is being waged on reservations from one end of the country to the other.

TAKE THE MONEY & RUN

With all the money floating around just to conduct studies of various kinds, some tribes figure that they could take the money and put it to a somewhat different use. While some tribes have turned back DOE checks under pressure from tribal members, others — including Minnesota's Prairie Island Nation, the Skull Valley Goshute of Utah and the Lower Brule Sioux of South Dakota — have said they applied for the funds to conduct studies that will prove the MRS option is unsafe for their people.

The Prairie Island Mdewakanton Sioux plan to use their $100,000 Phase I grant money to assure that a proper site characterization takes place for nuclear waste storage on Prairie Island and to educate tribal members in public forums which they hope will result in a tribal vote on the issue. The Mdewakanton Sioux have been fighting the Northern States Power Company's plans to expand the radioactive waste disposal site on Prairie Island (see sidebar on page 21). "Unlike the Mescalero Apache Tribal Council, the Mdewakanton Council will not be hiring industry people to speak to the community," said William Hardacker, legal counsel to the tribe.

Other Native Americans are not so sure that taking federal money from the MRS program is such a good idea, regardless of what use it is put to. "Even if tribes say they just want to study it, the U.S. government intends to hook tribes with the money," says Chief Jackson. "I know from experience that the government never gives you money for nothing."

"I know from experience that the government never gives you money for nothing"

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