The Salt Lake Tribune

For many on the Navajo Nation, getting water requires travel, a wait in long lines and lots of patience

(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) Christopher Chee waited in line for two hours to fill his water tank in Oljato-Monument Valley, San Juan County, on June 22, 2020. More than 30% of Navajo Nation households lack running water, and the problem is even worse in San Juan County where over 40% of Navajo Nation residents have to haul water. Families fill jugs at communal wells or buy bottled water from stores, both costly and time-consuming burdens that have become only more difficult during the pandemic.

By Zak Podmore •

Editor's note • *This is Part 1 of a three-part series from The Salt Lake Tribune, Report for America and the Solutions Journalism Network covering water access on the Navajo Nation in Utah. Part 2 looks at midterm solutions to bringing indoor plumbing to Navajo Nation residents, and Part 3 looks at long-term solutions for increasing water availability on the Navajo Nation.*

Monument Valley • Filling up a portable water tank at the public tap outside the post office in Monument Valley is an exercise in patience. Five or 10 pickup trucks carrying 250-gallon tanks wait in a line around the edge of a dirt lot most summer days, often in temperatures that top 100 degrees.

There are no trees to block the sun. Some vehicles idle with engines and air conditioners running. Other drivers r n the windows and place foldout shades in the windshield to block the glare.

“I waited for two hours,” said Christopher Chee, a resident of the Oljato community who was at the tap in late June on his monthly trip to fill up water for his eight-person household. “We’ll also use it to water our corn and for our sheep.”

Others in line said they make the trips weekly and that there’s usually a long wait. The pipes running to the tap are old and tend to break when they are put under too much pressure, a maintenance worker told The Salt Lake Tribune, so the water is dispensed slowly, filling a standard tank in roughly half an hour.

Just down the sandstone canyon, a tourist destination advertises the cabin where John Wayne slept while he was shooting John Ford Westerns in the mid-20th century, and the water storage facilities for the tap are on an inholding of private property. But every other direction is Navajo Nation — homesites scattered through sprawling desert so iconic that the nearby formation known as the Mitten is featured in the emoji for desert.

1 of 7

More than 40% of Navajo Nation households in Utah’s San Juan County do not have running water. Others have water connections but fear it is not fit to drink due to decades of uranium mining in the area that has contaminated many water sources.

For owners of livestock who are hooked up to water lines, waiting in line at the public tap and hauling the water back to their is more affordable than filling up troughs at home and paying expensive bills to the Navajo Nation Tribal Utility Authority.

The situation is hardly unique to Monument Valley. Fifty miles away in Bluff, members of the Navajo Nation drive for over an hour each direction to fill water outside an Episcopal mission due to high levels of naturally occurring arsenic in some water sources in Montezuma Creek and Aneth. On remote Piute Mesa south of Lake Powell, residents fill up at windmill-powered wells or rely on monthly deliveries of water from the nonprofit DigDeep.

[**RELATED STORY: In remote corner of San Juan County, Navajo Nation homes have running water for first time**]

With homes scattered miles apart and water wells expensive to drill — combined with decades of federal underfunding of tribal programs — building new water lines can become a difficult proposition.

“[The tribal government] is mostly focusing on bringing water to people living in clustered areas,” said Tommy Rock, a Diné (Navajo) researcher from the Monument Valley area who earned his doctorate studying water quality on the Navajo Nation. “But for people who live in isolated, rural areas, [water projects are often] out of the question.”

Prioritizing areas with more population density makes sense from a regulatory and cost-saving standpoint, Rock said, because it requires less treatment, less water quality sampling and carries lower construction costs, but encouraging people to move into towns can have detrimental effects on traditional knowledge and practices.

“To preserve our culture, our way of life, and to tackle a lot of social ills, is to go back to … the middle of nowhere and reconnect with our way of life, with our environment, with animals,” Rock said. “There’s a lot of teaching behind it as well.”

Off the grid

Many people living in remote areas without running water have found innovative ways to take care of cooking, cleaning and drinking needs, said Emma Robbins (Diné), the director of the Navajo Water Project for DigDeep, a national nonprofit dedicated to expanding water access in rural America.

After the coronavirus arrived on the Navajo Nation in March and it quickly became one of the hardest hit areas in the United States, news outlets from around the country wrote stories about what it's like to live through a pandemic without running water. But focusing on the lack of water availability only tells part of the story, Robbins said.

"Navajos are so DIY [do-it-yourself], and successful at it," Robbins said. "You see hand-washing stations that people have built, or different ways to wash your clothes."

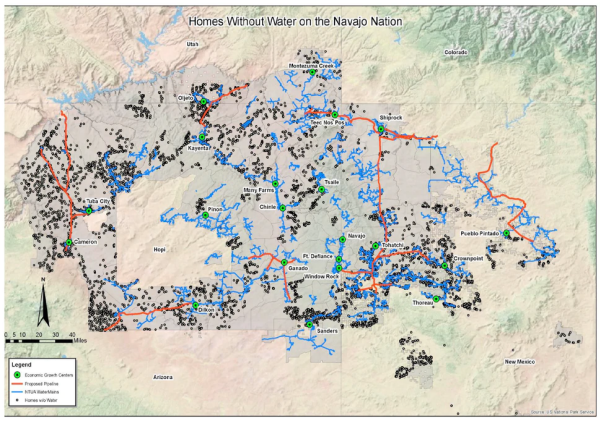
There is also an ethic of conservation that develops when water has to be hauled. In a recent article for Scientific American, Sunny Dooley, a Diné storyteller, described how she has learned to conserve water in her home.

"I typically use a gallon of water a day, for everything — cooking, drinking and washing up," she said. "My great-grandmother used to say, 'Don't get used to drinking water, because one of these days you're going to be fighting for it.' I have learned to live on very little." The average Utahn, by contrast, uses 242 gallons of water a day.

Dooley, like many members of the Navajo Nation, also described receiving help from family for hauling water.

"Having that network of family and being able to go to families' homes that do have running water [is critical]," Robbins said. "I was very fortunate to grow up with running water in Tuba [City, Ariz.]. But most of my family in Cameron [Ariz.] didn't

have it, and they would come to our house a couple times to fill up their water barrels, or take showers, or wash clothes. That's just apart of it. We're always looking out for each other."



(Courtesy of Navajo Tribal Utility Authority) More than 40% of Navajo Nation homes in Utah lack running water. A proposed piece of federal legislation would designate $210 million for water projects on the Utah Navajo strip.

Many of those systems have been strained during the pandemic, however, as families deal with lockdown orders and the economic downturn. Hauling water can become an enormous financial and time burden that's affected by long lines at the taps and rough conditions on remote dirt roads. And although the Monument Valley tap is paid for by the tribal government and area businesses, hauling water can be expensive in other areas.

A number of mutual aid efforts, relief groups and donation drives have mobilized since March to mitigate the disruptions caused by the coronavirus. DigDeep, for example, distributed 262,000 donated bottles of water to chapters.

Louis Williams, a Diné raft guide on the San Juan River who was out of work due to the pandemic, began delivering firewood to elders on remote reaches of the Navajo Nation in April with a group he founded called Heat Diné Homes.

“I’d go way out there on the mesa [south of the river] — so many families live out there,” Williams said. “And when I’d get to a house, it was always the same story: You got water?’” Soon, Williams’ water deliveries became as important as the firewood drops for elders enduring the pandemic lockdown.

Tainted water

In decades past, more water sources were available in San Juan County that allowed for shorter travel time for families hauling water, Rock said, but many wells have been contaminated by nearly a century of uranium and vanadium mining near Monument Valley and oil and gas drilling in the southeastern corner of Utah near Montezuma Creek and Aneth.

During his doctorate work at Northern Arizona University, Rock discovered uranium contamination in the water supply of Sanders, Ariz., which was likely linked to the Church Rock spill on the eastern Navajo Nation in New Mexico in 1979. Although less well known than the Three Mile Island disaster that occurred the same year in Pennsylvania, Church Rock released more radioactive material into the environment, and it remains the second-largest radioactive disaster in world history, behind only the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown in the then-Soviet Union.

Additionally, there are over 500 abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation, including dozens near Monument Valley. Rock said a windmill-powered well in the Oljato Chapter that was long used for livestock watering was closed around 2010 when uranium contamination was discovered.

The Environmental Protection Agency has put up signs at other wells along the Utah-Arizona border warning of uranium contamination, but in some cases they’ve continued to see use for livestock because of a lack of alternative options for

residents. Rock said there's no question that uranium exposure has led to devastating effects on communities in the area, but he said more public health studies are needed to determine the full extent of the situation.

To compound issues related to water quality, the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation has no formal water rights from the Colorado River Basin, making it more difficult to treat water from the river system like Denver or Las Vegas do.

Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, recently sponsored a bill that passed the U.S. Senate, which would provide legal water rights and hundreds of millions of dollars in funding to build water projects on the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation, including in Monument Valley, which could bring water to an additional 300 households.

The Indian Health Service estimates it would cost $700 million to provide access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation to all Navajo Nation homes.

A man waiting in line at the Monument Valley tap who asked not to be named said he had heard about the Utah bill but added he's not getting his hopes up after decades of promises.

He spent close to 30 years as a pipe fitter and welder in California before recently returning to the Navajo Nation, and he said he has seen impressive feats of engineering across the country. But when it comes to running water mains to communities on the Navajo Nation, he said, there is always an excuse: too rocky, too far, too expensive. Still, he said, the water rights bill would be a major step forward if it passes into law.

"It won't be easy," he said, "but I hope they can finally get it done."

Zak Podmore is a Report for America corps member and writes about conflict and change in San Juan County for The Salt Lake Tribune. Your donation to match our RFA grant helps keep him writing stories like this one; please consider making a tax-deductible gift of any amount today by clicking here.

WORLD TABLE

FEATURED COMMENTS

87
Yorgus
Utah

"The Indian Health Service estimates it would cost $700 million to provide access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation to all Navajo Nation homes."
So just do it. Drop in the bucket compared to a $1.9 trillion giveaway (tax cut) for the wealthy. It would be money well spent, to help people who are deserving.

View all 7 comments

zpodmore@sltrib.com
Follow @zak_podmore