

**Written Testimony Submitted April 3, 2014**  
**To The U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Appropriations Committee**  
**Twa-le Abrahamson-Swan--Spokane Tribe of Indians, Air Quality Program**

I submit this written testimony upon behalf of the Spokane Tribe of Indians and residents of the Spokane Indian Reservation. This testimony concerns the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the following budget items.

**Radon Categorical Grants (Pg 732) (FY 2015 PB: \$0.0M, FY 2013 Actual \$7.32; FY 2014 Enacted: \$8.05 M , FY 2015 Change: -\$8.0M) And FY 2014 Proposed Budget Cuts (Cuts rejected by Congress in the Omnibus Act, 2014) to 11.9 Regional FTE's that oversee the SIRG grant processes in EPA Regional Offices.**

**Environmental Program Management: (Pg 531) [FY 2013 Actual \$3.M; FY 2014 Enacted: \$2.36 M; FY 2015 Proposed: \$3.36 Change: \$1.0 M]**

**Science & Technology (Pg 101) [FY13 \$56.7 (Thousands) FY 2014 \$198.0; PB \$0.0; Difference (\$198.0)] Opposing this cut.**

My name is Twa-le Abrahamson-Swan. I am an enrolled member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians, located in Northeast Washington State. I am currently the Spokane Tribe's Air Quality Program Manager.

Radon is the leading environmental cause of cancer mortality. Radon is a known Class-A Carcinogen and the deaths caused by radon each year are preventable. Radon is a naturally-occurring, radioactive gas released in rock, soil, and water from the natural decay of uranium.

**Radon Risk is Significant in Indian Country**

The US Surgeon General and EPA estimate that radon causes more than 21,000 lung cancer deaths each year. Only smoking causes more lung cancer deaths. According to the Center for Disease Control, American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) have a higher prevalence of current smoking than most other racial/ethnic groups in the United States, making cigarette smoking plus exposure to radon gas a serious problem to the health of Tribal populations.<sup>1</sup>

- In 2011:
  - 31.5% of AI/AN adults in the United States smoked cigarettes, compared with 19.0% of U.S. adults overall.<sup>2</sup>
  - In 2004, among youths, American Indians and Alaska Natives had the greatest cigarette smoking prevalence (23.1%), followed by non-Hispanic whites (14.9%),

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Current Cigarette Smoking Rates in the United States. <http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/resources/data/cigarette-smoking-in-united-states.html#populations>

Hispanics (9.3%), non-Hispanic blacks (6.5%), and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (4.3%).<sup>2</sup>

Radon has been found in elevated levels in every state. No area of our country is risk-free. Nationwide, based on 1992 research, 1 in 15 homes test above the action level established by EPA of 4.0 picocuries per liter of air (pCi/L). Results on the Spokane Indian Reservation are even higher at almost 1 in 3 homes.

The Spokane Indian Reservation, located in Northeast Washington, is rich in uranium deposits and has high radon potential. There are two inactive open pit uranium mines on the Reservation and an adjacent uranium mill. As a college student, I wanted to study the impacts that uranium mining and milling had on the health of our people and the impacts to our traditional foods, air and water.

I learned about the types of pollution that get left behind after US policies deregulated and subsidized uranium mining, after a mining company abandons projects based on market prices—leaving tons of radioactive and acidic waste to flow into our rivers. We have an A to Z list of “contaminants of concern” associated with the uranium facilities, each with different health effects. We aren’t the only Tribal community left with a nuclear legacy. Elevated outdoor radon levels present a health risk to workers who will soon be hired to mitigate one of the mines as part of a Superfund Cleanup. However, for most people, the greatest exposure to radon comes from the home. Concentrations depend on natural geology and how individual homes breathe; the available routes and paths for radon to enter homes and ventilation rates vary for each and every home. Testing is the only way to know how much radon is in each home or school.

In 2011, I started testing schools and homes on the Reservation. Due to our Tribe’s inability to provide the 40% match associated with SIRG funds, we sought alternatives to fund testing and outreach. The Spokane Tribe was one of 99 tribes, tribal consortia or tribal organizations that have utilized services provided by EPA’s Radiation and Indoor Environments (R&IE) National Laboratory for analysis since 1996. EPA’s Radon Testing Program not only helped to promote radon awareness, but also provided radon test kits to Tribal communities, environmental justice partners, disadvantaged groups and non-profit organizations. Tribes from all 9 Regions with Federally Recognized tribes have participated in the EPA-LV Lab testing programs.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Success of Radon Programs in the Indian Country**

Radiation is a difficult subject to learn about, sometimes it’s difficult to explain to our communities. Each Tribe has a different way of sharing information and reaching their citizens and members. The Navajo Nation Radon Program successfully developed culturally appropriate education and outreach materials in their traditional language. The testing, education and

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<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Racial/Ethnic Differences Among Youths in Cigarette Smoking and Susceptibility to Start Smoking – United States, 2002-2004; Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. December 1, 2006; 55(47):1275-7.

<sup>3</sup> US Environmental Protection Agency Office of Radiation and Indoor Air. March 31, 2014.

outreach components are vital, but there are still obstacles we face in developing solutions. Some Tribes are just now learning the risks of radon, learning which homes and schools, which areas of their Reservations have the highest risks. In February and March of 2014, 24 Tribes submitted 461 radon canisters to the EPA radon lab for analysis.<sup>4</sup> There is not only an interest, but a need in Indian Country to address radon.

Since 2004, over 30 tribes/tribal consortia have participated in the SIRG program. The approximate total value of Tribal SIRG Awards is \$3,100,000. In Fiscal Year 2013, EPA awarded grants to 10 Tribes with a total value of \$304,000.<sup>4</sup> This only represents about 4 percent of the total SIRG budget of \$7.32 Million for FY 13.

SIRG funds are also used to support meetings and conferences that bring together radon stakeholders—community members, Tribes and States, federal agencies, non-profit organizations, educational programs and industry to share the latest technology and health impacts. These gatherings are important, as we learn different perspectives and support each other's work.

### **Most State, Tribal and Territorial Radon Programs Will Close**

**The proposed EPA budget cuts to its indoor radon program will eviscerate a voluntary program** that needs the minimum resources that the agency provides states, tribes and territories in creating radon risk reduction awareness for our communities. Under this budget, state, tribal and territorial programs will close and most consumer outreach on the state and local level will cease to exist.

### **Agency Cuts to Radon Science Infrastructure (Science and Technology) Are Problematic**

I started testing homes and schools on our Reservation in 2011 using canisters our Tribe received from the EPA radon lab. Our high school was preparing for an \$18 Million renovation; testing before and after construction was a priority. After developing a solid radon testing plan, the EPA radon lab mailed a box of canisters at no cost to our newly developing program. The canisters had to be exposed for 7 days, and then mailed within one day to the EPA lab. The tight shipping schedule was an issue for remote, rural Tribes like ours. With a goal to test each and every home, school and office on the Reservation, we purchased equipment that allowed us to analyze and calculate our own results. This has allowed us to become a more efficient and sustainable program. We are also generating tools for our community to make future land and housing decisions. A Radon Resistant building requirement for all new homes and buildings has been implemented. Our goal is to keep our people safe.

To date, my house has the highest levels identified, with peaks at 53 pCi/L and an average of 33 pCi/L. I don't smoke; neither do my kids, but our risk for lung cancer is the same as each of us smoking 106 cigarettes, or 5 packs per day. That is while we are at home. In my office, it's a pack and a half per day or 16 pCi/L. In our schools, kids are being exposed to this odorless,

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<sup>4</sup> US Environmental Protection Agency Office of Radiation and Indoor Air. March 31, 2014.

colorless, tasteless radioactive gas, a known Class-A Carcinogen. There are communities like ours across Indian country and rural America that don't have any information about radon, let alone a close place to buy a radon test kit. Funding for education and outreach is vital; it needs to be increased, not cut.

We support organizations like AARST who are requesting a modest increase of \$78,000 under this section to allow for inter-comparisons between two private radon chambers in the US and the EPA reference source with international reference points, referred to as STAR Chambers.

### **Congress Reinstated EPA Proposed Cuts in Consolidated Budget Appropriation, 2014**

Last year, this Congress once approved reinstatement of not only this State funding but reinstated the FTE's in the Regional Offices of EPA so that the funding could be properly funded and administered.<sup>i</sup> On behalf of the Spokane Tribe, I would like to thank the Congress for both reinstatements and request that radon be funded as follows.

1. **Radon Categorical Grants – (Page732) (FY 2015 PB: \$0.0M, FY203 Actual \$7.32; FY 2014 Enacted: \$8.05 M , FY 2015 Change: -\$8.0M)** Opposing this cut and recommending that \$14.5 Million be allocated to adjust for inflation and to increase the ability of SIRG grantees and to fund the Tribes, Territories and States. Additionally, the Regional 11.9 FTE's that oversee SIRF that were cut by EPA in the 2014 Submittal to Congress (EPA PB FY 14 was -\$1,725.0 / -11.9 FTE) needs to be reinstated if the SIRG funding is to be properly managed. Congress rejected all of the EPA FY 2014 cuts and restored this funding in the Consolidate Appropriations Act, 2014.
2. **Environmental Program Management: (Page531) [FY 2013 Actuals\$3.M; FY 2014 Enacted: \$2.36 M; FY 2015 Proposed: \$3.36 Change: \$1.0 M]** We support this allocation.
3. **Science & Technology (Pg 101 & 531) [FY13 \$56.7 (Thousands) FY 2014 \$198.0; PB \$0.0; Difference (\$198.0)]** Requesting that \$78,000 be reinstated to ensure grants to enable U.S. STAR radon chambers to inter-compare with International STAR Chambers to maintain quality assurance of reference for a national radon standard.

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<sup>i</sup> See Pages 29 and 32 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014  
[docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20140113/113-HR3547-JSOM-G-I.pdf](https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20140113/113-HR3547-JSOM-G-I.pdf)