



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., calls repeal of Bennett Freeze legislation ‘great day’ for Navajo people

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., called today’s news of Congress’ official repeal of language creating the former Bennett Freeze Area in the Western Navajo Agency, “a great day for my elderly, my medicine people, my young, and my grandchildren who have been affected by the Bennett Freeze for over 40 years.”

This bill is expected to be signed into law by President Barack Obama within two weeks.

While the Navajo Nation Council was in the second day of its spring session, word came from Congresswoman Ann Kirkpatrick’s office that the House of Representatives voted unanimously to repeal the Bennett Freeze law.

Rep. Kirkpatrick and U.S. Sen. John McCain, along with Sen. Jon Kyl and Reps. Trent Franks and Gabrielle Giffords, worked together to remove the Freeze from the books. The measure introduced by Sen. McCain passed the Senate unanimously on March 12, and the Congresswoman introduced an identical bill on March 26.

“Far too many people in tribal areas lack basic necessities like running water and electricity, and they deserve to know that their government will not stop them from pulling themselves out of poverty,” Rep. Kirkpatrick said. “Today, members of the House from both parties helped make sure Washington bureaucrats won’t stand in the way of folks trying to improve their homes and develop their communities again.”

President Shirley praised them for their work.

“The Navajo people and I are grateful to these federal lawmakers for their heartfelt concern,” the President said. “They recognized the injustice done, carried that

message to their colleagues, did their best to correct it, and prevailed.”

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Rep. Kirkpatrick said work can begin to help rehabilitate the 1.5 million area where all development has been prohibited for 40 years.

“With the Bennett Freeze law off the books, the Arizona delegation can focus on working with tribal leaders and local communities to help our people help themselves, Rep. Kirkpatrick said. “We’re going to work to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure, improve our schools, and provide health care for everyone on tribal lands, so that people in greater Arizona have the same opportunities as everyone else.”

After three years and four months, this was the second critical step necessary to allow the Navajo people in the area to resume their lives as best they can after 40 years.

U.S. District Judge Earl H. Carroll signed a court order on Dec. 5, 2006, to remove the 40-year-old Bennett Freeze and to dispose of all claims in the 1934 litigation between the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe.

The order had the effect of lifting the 40-year-old Bennett Freeze and ending the hardships it created for thousands.

“There was a lot of suffering, a lot of heartache, a lot of frustration, and a lot of tears throughout those years,” President Shirley said.

He said the task now is to bring economic development to the area so that the remaining families, and those in the future, will not have to flee to find jobs and economic survival elsewhere as their parents and grandparents have had to do.

He said a significant investment will be needed to rehabilitate and to develop the land.

“Whether it be housing, grocery stores, gas stations, schools, hospitals, police stations, paving the roads, we’re going to be as diligent as we can be to try to do

that, and do it as soon as possible,” President Shirley said.

He said he hopes to educate Congress about the conditions that still exist in the former Bennett Freeze Area and throughout the Navajo Nation. While the country currently has an 8.5 percent unemployment rate, the jobless rate on the Navajo Nation has never been better than 50 percent.

Ironically, he said, a 100 percent unemployment rate was imposed on the former Bennett Freeze Area by the former Commissioner of Indian Affairs Robert Bennett and maintained for 40 years by successive administrations. Now is the time to correct that injustice, he said.

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