



The Navajo Nation Council — Office of the Speaker

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April 10, 2009

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Navajo Judiciary Committee members attend 34th Annual Federal Bar Association Indian Law Conference

Conference held on tribal lands for the first time in history at Pueblo of Pojoaque

SANTA FE, N.M. — Members of the Judiciary Committee of the 21st Navajo Nation Council attended the 34th Annual Federal Bar Association Indian Law Conference on April 2-3 to be educated on various federal and legal issues affecting local, tribal, county and state governments.

For the first time in history, the annual conference was held on tribal lands at Buffalo Thunder on the Pueblo of Pojoaque with the theme, "Coming Home to Indian Country." The conference gave conference attendees the opportunity to examine issues through discussion panels focused on reservation-based economics, renewable energy, religious freedoms, environmental regulations, legal ethics, Supreme Court litigation and gaming.

One case in particular garnered intense interest by conference attendees; a petition for certiorari in the Navajo Nation vs. the United States Forest Service was filed on Jan. 5, 2009 from the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

In this petition concerning the San Francisco Peaks case, the committee members learned the Navajo Nation asked the court to resolve a widespread disagreement among the circuits as to whether a governmental action constitutes a substantial burden under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, unless it forces individuals to choose between following the tenets of their religion and receiving a governmental benefit or coerces them by threatening civil or criminal sanction to act contrary to their religious beliefs.

In other conference presentations, attendees discussed issues related to the Obama Administration, ways to improve government-to-government relationships with all levels of government and how the federal stimulus package will benefit Indian Country.

The recent nomination of U.S. Senator Ken Salazar (D-CO) as the 50th Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior by a unanimous vote of the U.S. Senate on Jan. 20, 2009, was another topic of discussion.

Committee members were pleased with Salazar's appointment by President Obama and believe he is a strong supporter in restoring integrity of the nation-to-nation relationship with American Indian tribes.

"We have to keep abreast of all current issues that affect the great Navajo Nation at the national level," said Kee Allen Begay Jr., chairperson of the Judiciary Committee. "The most pressing issue for the Navajo Nation Judiciary Committee is taking an influential position of Navajo Nation jurisdiction and sovereignty issues."

Leonard Tsosie, member of the Judiciary Committee, concluded that the conference brought many issues and agendas to light from the new Administration and the information presented is beneficial to the Navajo Nation and to tribes across the United States.

Begay praised members of the committee for attending the conference and he was impressed with the presenters and the selection of topics that were discussed. Judiciary Committee members that attended, included: Ray Berchman (Oak Springs/St. Michaels), Ernest Yazzie (Baahaali/Church Rock) and Leonard Tsosie (Pueblo Pintado/Torreon/Whitehorse Lake).

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