



## Navajo Nation Council – Office of the Speaker

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April 5, 2012

**NEWS RELEASE:**

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### **Meeting with Senators, council continues to ask questions on water rights settlement**

**TUBA CITY, Ariz.** – Council Delegates attended a meeting with Senators Jon Kyl and John McCain that was organized by the Navajo Washington Office to discuss the water rights settlement (S.2109) and the former Bennett Freeze Area.

The meeting was attended by 12 Council Delegates, Speaker Johnny Naize, President Ben Shelly, and Vice President Rex Lee Jim.

Opening remarks were provided by President Shelly before the floor was turned over to the Senators.

Senator John McCain commented that it is not a practice of his or his colleague to force water settlements on any tribe and the final decision rests with the tribally elected officials of both the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe.

“We are here to answer questions and I am very happy to provide any information I can, but beyond that it is not my role to try and persuade anyone,” Senator Kyl commented.

“If the Navajo people don’t want the water settlement, it’s fine with us,” John McCain stated. “We have no intention whatsoever of doing anything except abiding by the will of the Navajo people as articulated by the president, vice president, and the council.”

Both Senators reassured the tribal leadership that Senate Bill 2109 would not move forward if it was not approved by the Navajo and Hopi councils.

The floor was immediately opened for the council delegates to ask questions and provide comments on both the water settlement and the former Bennett Freeze area.

Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Harrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) asked about the possibility of amendments to the settlement and expressed concerns, both his and of his constituents, with sections 13.14 and 13.17 of the agreement, which deal with NGS and Peabody.

“In the context of the whole discussion regarding water rights and the Bennett Freeze, would you be open to holding field hearings through the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, House Indian Affairs

Committee, and OMB that could address comprehensively the problems our people face,” Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, and Tsidi To ii) commented. “The education of your colleagues and committee members is essential so that they understand the issues in Western Agency.”

Council Delegates Duane Tsinigine (Bodaway/Gap, Coppermine, K’ai’bii’to, LeChee, and Tonalea/Red Lake), Lorenzo Curley (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahata Dziil, Tse si ani, and Wide Ruins), and Joshua Lavar Butler (Tuba City), all members of the Navajo-Hopi Land Commission, commented on the former Bennett Freeze Area.

The members of the Navajo-Hopi Land Commission expressed concerns and provided recommendations on rehabilitating the former Bennett Freeze Area, funding for both the former Bennett Freeze Area and relocatees, a reorganization of functions and activities of the Office of Navajo and Hopi Indian Relocation (ONHIR), and the cost effectiveness of relocation.

Amicable discussions occurred during the one hour meeting and council delegates promptly left the meeting after it adjourned to interact with and address the community representatives.

Due to heightened concerns expressed by community members, Speaker Naize issued a statement on March 4, “I want to assure the Navajo people that no decisions will be made and no deals agreed to by either me or Council at this meeting. All agreements that will be made by Council on water rights settlement will be done so with transparency in public sessions.”

Speaker Naize and council did not make any agreements or deals. Instead they used the opportunity to ask the senators questions about aspects of the settlement that concerned them and the communities they represent.

In order to assure the public and media about the intentions of the meeting, Speaker Naize announced on the morning of March 5 that he would address the public and the press immediately following the meeting.

“As I said in my statement yesterday, no deals or agreements would be made at this meeting and today the leadership kept their word,” said Speaker Naize. “I also want you to know that you will be notified about the settlement and be provided an opportunity to comment during meetings that will be scheduled at the directive of the Naa’bik’iyati Committee.”

The speaker made provisions for the public platform during which the president and the vice president had the opportunity to also address the public.

Community activists, elders, and young children also had the chance to address the community and council delegates.

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