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June 21, 2012

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Resources and Development Committee discusses options to address horse problem despite presidential line-item veto

BIA needs to take more responsibility on the matter, committee says

ST. MICHAELS, Ariz. – At their regular meeting on June 19, the Resources and Development Committee continued discussion on the nation’s feral horse problem, deciding what other options were available to address the dilemma, despite President Ben Shelly’s line-item veto of important legislation that would have funded a nationwide feral horse and livestock roundup.

“We have a problem out there, and we need to tackle it with or without the president,” said Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie.

One idea for capturing feral horses that Delegate Tsosie shared with the committee involved building horse catchment systems on land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on the New Mexico side of Navajo land.

“BLM would build the catchment systems. They are surrounded by Navajo Nation land,” said Delegate Tsosie, who added that construction costs could be fronted by the BLM.

Council Delegate Katherine Benally contended that the Bureau of Indian Affairs was being let off the hook easy in the matter, and that the federal entity was not upholding its trust responsibility to protect and care for Navajo land and resources.

When BIA Natural Resources officials delivered a report to the committee on June 5 regarding the need for Navajo grazing permit adjustments, “They just said, ‘Ok, these are your problems. This is what the land looks like,’” said Delegate Benally, “I don’t know when and why they decided they were going to turn it [responsibility] over to the Navajo Nation...unfunded.”

Both Council Delegate Leonard H. Pete and Delegate Benally agreed that a special discussion with Sharon Pinto, regional director of BIA’s Navajo Regional Office, was necessary to call for additional involvement and action from BIA.

The nation needs to be careful in determining how much authority to extend to the BIA in the matter, stated Delegate Tsosie, who reminded the committee of former BIA commissioner John Collier’s failed and disastrous attempt at livestock reduction in the 1930’s.

“BIA should have the resources to take care of it,” said Delegate Tsosie, in regard to Navajo land management, “yet, we continue to try to take care of it.”

Earlier in meeting, the committee received a status report on the Navajo Nation Veterinary and Livestock Program from director, Glenda Davis.

Davis reported the program is doing their best to meet the demand of vet and livestock services from Diné citizens, but difficulties arise when the program only has two available staff veterinarians for the whole nation.

One critical component she saw needing funding was the completion of aerial surveys to get a more accurate and representative picture of the status of Navajo land and resources.

A part of the \$2.7 million in emergency funds the Council requested in the feral horse legislation line-item vetoed by President Shelly earlier this month was to be used for an initial aerial survey to determine areas where the Navajo Department of Agriculture would have targeted feral livestock round-ups, stated director Leo Watchman, Jr.

Watchman and director of the Division of Natural Resources, Fred White, were called to the meeting that afternoon to elaborate on interactions with President Shelly prior to the line-item veto decision.

White revealed that when the president told him he was considering a veto of the legislation, White stated he advised the president to hear Watchman's horse livestock roundup plan before deciding.

According to White, when Watchmen arrived to inform President Shelly of the plan at a meeting a couple days later, the president "didn't want to consider hearing the plan."

"I don't think [President Shelly] really understands the magnitude of planning that occurred," said White, who was perplexed as to why the president was advised to line-item veto the bill.

Concluding the discussion, a committee decision was issued to invite President Shelly to their meeting next Tuesday. An invitation will also be extended to Sharon Pinto, BIA regional director, to attend the meeting.

In addition, a public meeting with grazing permit holders and other entities involved with the grazing matter on the Navajo Nation has been rescheduled for July 12 and 13. The meeting location will be determined by the Department of Agriculture, and will be forthcoming.

The committee endeavors to move a step closer toward finding viable solutions for solving the feral horse and livestock problem through ongoing and inclusive dialogue.

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