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Resources and Development Committee receives report on BIA's involvement in feral horse roundups

Committee also moves forward on planning a public meeting for grazing permit holders

ST. MICHAELS, Ariz. –The Resources and Development Committee on Tuesday received a report from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Navajo regional director, Sharon Pinto, about the agency's role as a cooperative partner to address the concern with feral horses and livestock on the Navajo Nation.

"We do not come onto the reservation unless a chapter specifically authorizes us to do so," said Pinto, clarifying that in order for the BIA to assist with a roundup at the community level, a chapter must first pass a resolution declaring the need for a roundup to occur.

According to Pinto, BIA follows Navajo Nation statutory requirements and procedures for livestock or equine roundups as set forth by 3 N.N.C. § 1311, when they respond to a chapter's request.

Early into the report, Council Delegate Leonard Pete (Chinle) asked for clarification on BIA's definition of "feral horse," because questions about the term produced varying definitions at the previous Resources meeting.

Feral horses are those that have been abandoned by their owners, Pinto said.

When BIA offers recommendations to chapters to reduce the feral horse problem, most times the entity is met with opposition from community members asking what the agency is doing there and why they are rounding up horses. For this reason, BIA says chapter approval is necessary.

However, community education efforts on roundup initiatives are crucial and need to be amped up before a roundup, admitted Pinto.

Council Delegate Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta), contending that equine roundups at the chapter level were proving not to be effective, said, "Our biggest concern is if we do not do a [nationwide] sweep, the problem will never be alleviated. One chapter at a time is really not doing the job. We can't settle. We have to find another solution."

Pinto said the BIA could look into conducting feral horse sweeps by agency as opposed to one at the chapter level if the committee wished to consider this as an option.

Delegate Pete asked whether agency resolutions should list supporting chapters in favor of proposed agency roundups to which the reply was, "Yes."

One thing both the committee and the BIA could agree on was the fact that effective enforcement of livestock and grazing regulations must be firmly exercised.

Council Delegate Roscoe Smith (Crystal, Fort Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill) wanted some assurance that efforts to solve the feral horse and land impact problem would be coordinated to ensure that “everyone is not doing their own thing.”

To encourage responsible ownership of livestock and compliance with permit conditions, one of the ideas brought forth to the discussion was possibly requiring permit holders to outline how they intend to implement erosion and sand dune control measures in their designated grazing area before they are issued a permit.

At the end of the report, discussion turned to the planning of the public meeting with grazing permit holders the Navajo Department of Agriculture is coordinating with direction from the Resources committee.

The meeting will start on July 12 and conclude on July 14 at noon. The location has not yet been finalized but will be announced as soon as a final decision is made.

On the first day, the committee plans for Navajo and federal agencies and departments involved with the grazing issue to deliver information and data to Navajo permit holders, informing them on the status of rangeland on the Navajo Nation as well as current permit information.

The remaining days will be geared specifically toward the development of a plan that will encourage responsible livestock grazing activity and ownership on the reservation, with significant input from permit holders.

“The elders want the land restored,” said Council Delegate Leonard Pete, repeating what elder citizens had expressed at a recent chapter meeting in Chinle.

Chinle elders recounted how high the greasewood used to grow on Navajo land decades ago, and hoped that the landscape would return to how it was while they were growing up, said Delegate Pete.

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