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Navajo Nation Council requests for better communication to the Navajo people on area water shortages, realistic timelines for mainline repairs and recovery

WINDOW ROCK – At the conclusion of the first day of the Winter Council Session on Monday, the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority provided an update report, at the request of the Navajo Nation Council, on the status of its operations to repair broken waterlines and restore water services to a number of Navajo communities that have been affected by water shortages due to sub-zero temperatures in most recent weeks.

“This is a public health issue,” said Council Delegate Nelson BeGaye (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaille/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch'izhi), who made the request to add the NTUA report to the agenda, along with a corresponding report by the Navajo Department of Emergency Management.

Delegate BeGaye stated the intent of the report's introduction was to bring broader awareness on the issue to delegates who may not have been thoroughly informed since President Ben Shelly issued a declaration of emergency last Friday because of the water shortages.

Rex Kontz, NTUA deputy general manager, said nearly 1,900 reports have been recorded by the utility authority by Navajo people who have called into to notify them of both household and area-wide water shortages and outages.

In part, what caused the water shortages, Kontz explained, is that sustained sub-zero temperatures allowed frost to penetrate deeper into the ground than normal. This caused some water mainlines buried four-feet below ground level to freeze, which “is very unusual for our area,” Kontz said.

As temperatures began to rise, mainlines thawed while the soil shifted to changing temperatures, and water lines broke, giving way to leakages. Kontz said this caused the loss of substantial amounts of water from being delivered to residences and businesses.

Council Delegate Duane Tsinigine (Bodaway/Gap, Coppermine, K'ai Bii'Tó, LeChee, Tonalea/Red Lake) expressed displeasure with NTUA's report, stating that it was the same report that was given before the Law and Order Committee last week.

Kontz had reported that the authority had been working with several Navajo Nation departments in a “recovery state” to fix and thaw frozen mainlines, assess damages, and repair broken lines. Part of this work included the hauling of water bottles to affected homes.

Delegate Tsinigine said due to the issuance of the emergency declaration, it “means that money is now available, and all I'm hearing is that you're using bottled water. This report does not stand well with me on a humanitarian issue.”

Delegate Russell Begaye (Shiprock) requested for NTUA to provide realistic timelines to affected communities on when they expect water to be restored, stating that he was especially concerned for elders and people with disabilities who would appreciate notification so as to properly coordinate with their families for assistance if water outages are expected to be on-going.

Several delegates, including Delegates Leonard Curley (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahata Dził, Tsé Si ání) and Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreón, Whitehorse Lake) prompted NTUA to develop better methods of communication to notify customers when service outages are expected.

Delegate Curley specifically called for the implementation of a strengthened public information campaign, through informational publications and radio announcements, in which customers could be informed of what to do in conditions where water freezes.

“From my understanding of the situation, we’re going to have all these emergencies across the Navajo Nation, and only a few workers to cover the entire area. Places like Lupton and Houck are not going to get services right away,” said Delegate Curley. “And so, the folks there are wondering what they can do and what their chapters can do to help alleviate situations.

Some delegates were critical of the state of emergency that was placed on the water shortage issue, expressing that when a larger lens is placed on the situation, some Navajos would argue that the issue of frozen pipes is a minor issue in context of those who have been living without running water.

Council Delegate Roscoe Smith (Crystal, Fort Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill) said he did not know how or whether repairs and restoration of mainlines could be sped up.

“This is nature, itself, taking its course. And we’re just part of the process, getting used to all these conveniences. Sometimes we have to heat up water on the stove, and do with washcloth or bottled water,” said Delegate Smith. “I’m out of water, I don’t have any water. I’ll do what I need to do to get water. So we’re back to fundamentals.”

Council Delegate Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) questioned what should be defined as an emergency.

“I would say eighty-percent of households on the Navajo Nation are without running water. Had I known that that constitutes an emergency, I would say that we have been in the state of emergency forever,” Delegate Benally said.

Many of Navajo citizens must haul their own water, and many of them from scarce sources and potentially unsafe sources, said Delegate Benally.

This is an issue the Council is trying to address, she continued, but in most cases, people will continue to obtain water from potentially unsafe sources “because there is no other way for them to get water.” To Delegate Benally, that situation constituted an emergency.

In the meantime, the Navajo Department of Emergency Management reported that they are currently setting up emergency operations centers and are assessing the needs of affected communities.

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