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Resources and Development Committee hears report on proposed Utah national conservation area in San Juan County

WINDOW ROCK – The Resources and Development Committee received an update report on Tuesday from two advocacy groups that are leading local efforts to turn public lands in Utah into a national conservation area – the main purpose centered on the protection of land-based Navajo cultural and traditional interests in San Juan County.

Willie Greyeyes, a member of Diné Bikéyah, an interest advocacy group primarily comprised of Utah Navajos, stated to the RDC that for years Navajos in San Juan County have experienced opposition when gathering traditional herbs and visiting sacred sites, among other land-based Navajo lifeway practices, in the area.

Navajo people have long used the land for subsistence and cultural practices to maintain holistic health, Greyeyes said, and for those reasons Diné Bikéyah is working to ensure protection of traditional access and use through the establishment of a national conservation area.

The group has been working in unison with Round River Conservation Studies, a non-profit organization dedicated to conservation strategies that preserve and restore places of wilderness.

Greyeyes was joined by Round River Conservation Studies executive director Dennis Sizemore and Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources director Fred White.

White said the national conservation area proposal had been introduced to the Navajo Nation nearly two years ago.

“Areas in San Juan County, Utah are managed by outside agencies. Utah Navajo communities wanted to make sure they have access so that they won’t be restricted. These lands have been used for centuries for hunting, grazing, traditional offerings, and herb collection,” said White, who added that many agencies require a permit to allow use of the land and Navajo families are concerned.

Round River Conservation Studies was selected to assist in the effort and to perform an assessment of the conservation area proposal, said White.

Under the direction of the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice-President, the Division of Natural Resources established a memorandum of agreement with Round River Conservation Studies to further explore the protection efforts.

“We have gone to Washington [D.C.], and have received favorable recognition on this proposal. They are encouraging us to work with those other interests out there,” said Greyeyes, referring to county, state, and federal governmental entities.

RDC chair Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) asked Greyeyes if his group and their partners were planning to develop a legislation requesting support for the establishment of a conservation area or land management area.

Greyeyes said legislation would be developed in the future, especially after the groups gained considerable encouragement from national leaders to pursue the effort.

White emphasized that the groups were working cooperatively with other stakeholders on the proposal.

“It will be a cooperative proposal that all stakeholders will be proposing. The drivers will be the San Juan [County] Commission and the Utah Navajo communities. The proposal will require support from Council in the future, but we’re still in the preliminary stages,” White said.

Greyeyes said the groups advocating to protect Navajo interests in San Juan County have proposed for 1.9 million acres of land to be protected as specially managed areas, while the county has counter-proposed 600,000 acres.

Council Delegate Leonard Pete (Chinle) requested a more defined map of the proposed area, in addition to telling photographs of the geographical layout of the area for future presentations of the proposal before the Council.

The Resources and Development Committee voted 4-0 in approval of the report.

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