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Resources and Development Committee discusses feral horse round up and reviews the proposed Navajo Rangeland Improvement Act

TSE BONITO, N.M. – On Tuesday, the Resources and Development Committee discussed an expenditure and progress report from the Navajo Department of Agriculture department manager Leo Watchman regarding the feral horse round up.

“The prime time to act was as soon as the legislation was signed, before the rainy season and when these horses were gathering at the water holes,” said RDC member Council Delegate Leonard H. Pete (Chinle), referencing Legislation No. 0202-13 which was passed by the Navajo Nation Council and signed by President Ben Shelly on July 25.

Watchman stated that approximately 1,100 horses have been captured at a cost close to \$700 per horse and that laborers have covered over 7,000 miles of terrain.

Although the cost per horse is relatively high, the department is still awaiting the delivery of essential equipment needed for the capture of horses. Watchman also stated that the initiative has educated livestock owners about feral horses, livestock permitting, and effective management.

“According to the report, there is 64,000 horses out there. That means the Nation will need to spend \$40 million just to capture them,” said Delegate Pete. “Maybe we should offer \$90 per head, no questions. If you chase it down, just drop it off and we’ll pick it up. That might be a better way to spend the budget.”

Council Delegate David Tom (Beclabito, Cove, Gad’i’áhi/To’Koi, Red Valley, Sheepsprings, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Tsé ałnáoz’t’l’í) questioned the round up efforts in the Eastern Navajo Agency and asked if the department was being sensitive to complaints by local residents.

In response, Watchman said his employees follow the department’s policies and procedures while interacting with the public to deter and subside any confrontation. He also added that the Eastern Navajo Agency has created challenges due to checkerboard land status areas.

“In Eastern Agency there is a different land status. They have Bureau of Land Management lands, Indian allotments and trust land,” said Watchman. “This makes our efforts a little more difficult due to jurisdictional agreements.”

At the conclusion of the discussion, Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake)

recommended that the department pause the round up operation until the end of winter and after an assessment of current practices and expenditures is completed.

The RDC accepted the report with a vote of 4-0.

The RDC also held a special meeting in Window Rock on Thursday, regarding the proposed Navajo Rangeland Improvement Act, formerly known as the Navajo Grazing Act.

The proposed NRIA, presented by Navajo Department of Justice attorney Bidtah Becker and Ray Castillo with the Navajo Department of Agriculture, seeks to revise and improve grazing permit guidelines and procedures to strengthen grazing laws.

“We need to identify the goals and implementation process of this proposed draft,” said RDC vice chair Council Delegate Roscoe Smith (Crystal, Fort Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill).

Watchman stated that the Navajo Department of Agriculture is working to dissolve the grazing board system and implement Range Conservation Officers.

RCO’s would be full-time employees charged with the same responsibilities as grazing officials, in addition to protecting the ecological health of the land by emphasizing the proper management of rangelands from a scientific perspective.

“I found that almost 8,000 grazing permit holders do not use their permits properly,” said RDC member Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake). “Instead, they use it as an excuse to tell others ‘This is my land,’ and prevent young Navajo families from moving back to Navajoland.”

Delegate Tsosie added that permit holders often do not allow families to obtain homesite leases on their grazing areas, and recommended that permits being used improperly be cancelled to allow families to begin the process of obtaining homesite leases.

“The problem is we do not have strong enforcement of the grazing laws,” said Council Delegate Danny Simpson (Becenti, Crownpoint, Huerfano, Lake Valley, Nageezi, Nahodishgish, Tse’ii’ahi, Whiterock). “[Grazing] officials are more worried about getting elected than enforcing grazing laws.”

At the conclusion of the discussion, Delegate Smith asked the department to continue working on the Navajo Rangeland Improvement Act and to incorporate the RDC’s concerns and recommendations.

The RDC voted 3-0 to accept the report.

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