



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Resources and Development Committee receives community reports regarding oil drilling activities and concerns

NAGEEZI, N.M. – On Tuesday, the Resources and Development Committee received reports from Nageezi, Counselor, Ojo Encino, and Torreon Chapters regarding oil-drilling activities and concerns related to sacred sites and oil drilling leases. Each of the chapters is located in the Eastern Navajo Agency in New Mexico.

RDC Chair Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat) stated that the purpose was to hear all the concerns directly from the impacted communities and departments that are involved with oil drilling.

“We need all the information that is needed to make policy recommendations to resolve these issues,” stated Delegate Shepherd.

Diné Medicine Man’s Association, Inc. board member Etta Arviso and Torreon community member Daniel Tso, raised the issue that sacred sites and cultural sensitivity were not considered when oil drilling permits and leases were considered and issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Land Management.

Tso added, “There has been many violations of policies and regulations when oil drilling began on the Nation. Diné Fundamental Law and the peoples’ decisions need to be considered when leases and permits are considered. Also, the federal government and the state receives most of the revenues from the oil and the state should invest some of the oil revenues back into the local communities.”

RDC member Council Delegate Davis Filfred (Mexican Water, Aneth, Teecnospos, Tólikan, Red Mesa) asked if all sacred sites are identified within the impacted area and if the impacted chapters are certified, which would allow the chapters to explore the options of receiving funds from the state or the oil companies to address infrastructure needs.

“Whose land is the sacred site located on? We need all these questions answered before a decision is made,” stated Delegate Filfred.

According to a Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department letter dated Feb. 17 to the RDC, oil and gas development in the San Juan Basin is considered under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and responsible federal agencies, BLM and BIA, are to take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties, such as archeological sites, sacred sites, etc. The Farmington BLM field office is amending their Resource Management Plan to address issues related to oil and gas development, which will affect Navajo Cultural Landscapes and the Greater Chacoan Landscape.

NNHPD is requesting BLM to draft a Cultural Resource Management Plan, which will be designed to ensure that appropriate measures are taken to identify, evaluate, protect, and mitigate effects to cultural resources and traditional cultural properties. NNHPD does not have all traditional cultural properties and sacred areas documented in the San Juan Basin, according to the letter.

Nageezi Chapter president Ervin Chavez raised concerns over the aggressiveness of the oil companies that seek approval signatures from allottees, "It doesn't sit well with us on how they persuade and cater to the allottees for opportunities to drill for oil on their lands."

BIA Navajo region director Sharon Pinto reported that tribal consultation does takes place with the Nation and the Farmington Indian Minerals Office was created to consolidate and integrate Indian allotted oil and gas management functions.

"FIMO provides a one-stop customer service for allottees regarding all aspects of their mineral interests. The office has 200 to 300 walk-in's a month and chapter outreach is also done. I also include all activities regarding the FIMO in my quarterly reports to Council," added Pinto.

"As the Bureau was giving their report, the people in the chapter were shaking their heads 'no'. Something is wrong here," stated Delegate Shepherd. "We need to consider all communication from all parities and get on the same page."

RDC member Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To ii) raised the point that the impacted chapters only presented two chapter resolutions that reflected the interest of sacred sites and revenues not being shared with the chapters.

"As I look at the chapter resolutions given to us today, the chapters only voice their concern with sacred sites and the chapters request for oil revenues. Why didn't the chapters include resolutions regarding the other issues? The chapter needs to explore substantial evidence and identify the core concerns. If there are crucial concerns that need to be addressed, we need to bring this forth to the federal agencies involved," stated Delegate Phelps.

Nageezi Chapter president Ervin Chavez stated that the chapters should be involved in the process when oil leases and permits are considered.

"I understand that some people favor oil drilling, but we need to consider the safety of the entire community. For example, a safety evacuation plan in case of an emergency was never shared with the chapter from the oil companies. Some allottees also tell the chapter to stay out of their business, but when the oil explosion happened a few months ago, everyone ran to the chapter for help. The chapter needs to be involved for everyone's safety," stated Chavez.

The RDC approved the reports with a 3-0 vote with one directive for the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency, Navajo Minerals Department, Navajo Nation Department of Justice, Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Farmington Indian Minerals Office to meet, discuss, and present recommendations regarding all issues and concerns in 30 days.

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