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President Shelly Starts Town Hall Meetings About Utah Navajo Trust Fund

ANETH, Utah – Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly started a series of town hall style meetings about the Utah Navajo Royalties Hold Fund at Aneth Chapter house before nearly 130 people Thursday afternoon.

The fund, more commonly known as the Utah Navajo Trust Fund, has been without a trustee since 2008 when the Utah state legislature voted to forgo their trust responsibility.

Since then the fund has grown to about \$42 million and the President started a series of town hall meetings to gain insight from Utah Navajos for direction of the fund with the Navajo Nation being the trustee.



President Shelly spoke for nearly 45 minutes during a presentation Thursday night, which began a series of seven town hall meetings about the former Utah Navajo Trust Fund.

“The Navajo Nation has an official position. Navajo wants to be the new trustee,” the President said.

The President added he is committed to creating a resolution by consulting with the Utah Navajos and how they want the fund to be managed with the Navajo Nation as the trustee.

The U.S. Congress would have to name a new trustee.

The President reasoned that the Navajo Nation should become the trustee of the fund since the original 1933 Congressional act was between Utah, the United States and the Navajo Nation.

According to the act, Utah Navajos of San Juan County receive 37.5 percent of royalties generated from 17 oil wells in the Aneth Extension area in Utah. The remainder of the royalties goes toward the Navajo Nation central government.

“The state (of Utah) doesn’t want to be the trustee. The federal government doesn’t want to be the trustee. We should be the trustee because the original agreement was between the three,” President Shelly said.

During the evening with more than four hours of testimony from 25 speakers, specific subjects about the trust fund varied and not everyone agreed that the Navajo Nation should be the trustee of the fund.

One reason was some residents who testified said Window Rock didn’t need control of the money, however they didn’t differentiate between the role of a trustee and an administrator of the fund.

In addition, though Congress set the percentage split, some residents said they didn’t want the Navajo Nation to receive a larger portion of the trust fund and some residents said they wanted a larger percentage of the trust fund for Utah Navajos

During a power point presentation, President Shelly pointed out that the royalties generated from the Aneth Extension area goes to the Navajo Nation first, then the Bureau of Indian Affairs sends a letter to the Navajo Nation informing the Nation the amount designated for the Utah Navajo Trust Fund. Then the Navajo Nation sends that amount to the state of Utah, which goes toward the trust fund.

Another reason people didn’t want the tribe to be a trustee of the fund was because they didn’t want to risk the fund becoming a part of Navajo bureaucracy such as the procurement and the Signature Authorization Sheet (SAS) process.

“I don’t want the tribe to have this fund. It takes about ten days from one office to the next to sign, the people here in Utah can not wait that long to get some type of help,” said Bill Todachennie, Aneth Chapter vice president.

Other topics included the need for roads, scholarships, housing and environmental protections. And some speakers said that Aneth Chapter should get a larger portion of the trust fund than other chapters because of the environmental challenges from the oil wells in the immediate Aneth area.

Aneth Chapter President John Billie said Aneth Chapter has problems like water and air pollution created by the oil wells including a lingering smell created by the wells.

“We have water damage in this area. I have over 120 families that need power lines. We need help,” Billie said.

Currently, the wells in the Aneth Extension area generate between \$2 to \$4 million a year that is designated for San Juan County Utah Navajos for scholarships and infrastructure.

Seven chapters have boundaries in Utah. However, three chapter houses are in Arizona with boundaries that extent into Utah and other Utah chapters have boundaries that extend into Arizona.

Billie also asked for a more detailed plan about how the tribe would be a trustee of the fund.

“We want to see a thorough plan of what you think to be a trustee. That doesn’t mean that we are going to say you’re the trustee, we want to see a plan,” Billie said.

The following is the schedule of the remaining town hall meetings about the Navajo Utah Trust Fund. All meetings are scheduled at 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. at the respective chapter house.

- Feb. 21, 2012
Teec Nos Pos, Ariz.
- Feb. 22, 2012
Mexican Water, Ariz.
- Feb. 23, 2012
Navajo Mountain, Utah
- Feb. 24, 2012
Oljato, Utah
- Feb. 27, 2012
Dennehosto, Ariz.

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