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## PRESIDENT BEGAYE URGES CONGRESS TO REVIEW FEMA FUNDING FOR TRIBES



Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, President Russell Begaye testified on the critical need for FEMA assistance to tribal nations during times of disaster and emergency.

WASHINGTON D.C.-On Wednesday, Feb.8, during a U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs oversight hearing on 'Emergency Management in Indian Country', President Russell Begaye testified on behalf of the Navajo Nation, urging Congress to review Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funding policies for tribes.

In his testimony, President Begaye spoke about two requests the Navajo Nation had made for emergency declarations that FEMA had denied.

Responding to the Gold King Mine Spill of Aug. 2015, where millions of gallons of toxic mine waste was released into the Animas and San Juan River, the Navajo Nation submitted an application to FEMA for an emergency declaration on Oct. 2, 2015.

FEMA denied the application on Oct. 20, 2015, stating "the vast majority of the response and recovery efforts for this event fall un-

der the authorities of other federal agencies."

Again, on Sep. 21, 2016, the Navajo Nation submitted a FEMA major disaster declaration application in response to flooding that occurred in Shiprock, N.M., on Aug. 3, 2016. The flooding caused significant damage to area infrastructure causing many families to be evacuated. The damage caused was estimated to be \$967,516.

On Oct. 12, 2016, FEMA denied the application citing that they determined "that the impact to individuals and households from this event was not of such severity and magnitude as to warrant supplemental federal disaster assistance."

"Each of FEMA's responses was short and general. They did not explain how and why they reached the conclusion that they did and we can only speculate about the basis of their conclusion," President Begaye said. "We need more guidance from FEMA on their decision-making process."



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President Begaye also recommended that FEMA consider a class of disaster relief that would allow assistance for individuals who have disaster damages that are localized in scope, even if tribal government functions and facilities are not affected.

In his introductory statement, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs John Hoeven (R-N.D.) said it is incumbent upon FEMA to effectively assist in recovery. Chairman Hoeven also stated that tribes can seek emergency aid directly from the president instead of going through the states.

“This is designed to help with timely requests and timely assistance to hard hit communities,” he said.

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Vice Chairman Tom Udall (D-N.M.) recognized President Begaye in his opening statements, citing the president’s strong leadership and dedication to tribal self-determination and self-governance in managing natural disas-

ters on the Nation.

“The federal government’s response to the Gold King Mine Spill has been the most frustrating thing I have seen the Navajo Nation go through,” Vice Chairman Udall said. “Now, the federal government is denying liability for personal damage claims including for Navajo farmers. This is unacceptable.”

Throughout this testimony, President Begaye emphasized the critical need for FEMA assistance to tribal nations during times of disaster and emergency. Given the limited resources of Indian tribes, the president said that even localized disaster events will greatly challenge the internal resources of most tribes.

“I commend this Committee for focusing on tribal difficulties in obtaining disaster assistance from the federal government. Thank you,” President Begaye said.

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