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President Nez speaks in support of policy and regulation changes to expand broadband coverage for the Navajo Nation

PHOTO: Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez welcomes telecommunications industry leaders to the Rural Networks Conference hosted by the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission at San Juan College in Farmington, N.M. on July 31, 2019.

FARMINGTON N.M. – Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez joined U.S. House Assistant Speaker Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.) of New Mexico, in welcoming telecommunications industry leaders, tribal leaders, and other entities to the Rural Networks Conference hosted by the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission at San Juan College in Farmington, New Mexico on Wednesday.

In his opening remarks, President Nez spoke about the importance of strengthening partnerships between the Navajo Nation and telecommunications companies to create solutions by revisiting and changing policies and regulations in order to bring more broadband coverage to rural areas
including the Navajo Nation. President Nez was also invited to participate in a roundtable discussion regarding broadband expansion efforts in tribal communities.

“We welcome the telecommunications companies and other groups who have interests in providing broadband for the Navajo Nation to put forth solutions and ideas and we’re willing to help develop changes in Navajo Nation policies and regulations, including the issue of right-of-way proposals, to help move that forward,” said President Nez, who was joined by Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission Office Executive Director Christopher Becenti.

“In the past, right-of-way corridors have been created for use by multiple utilities and in some cases, have been used for other non-intended items other than utility lines. We have been very generous in waiving fees for rights-of-way for telecommunication companies even though our Nation has financial concerns due to the pending closure of Navajo Generating Station and Kayenta Mine,” added President Nez.

During the conference, Assistant Speaker Ben Ray Luján announced the introduction of the Broadband Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act, a bipartisan broadband package aimed at bridging the digital divide and expanding broadband in rural and underserved communities, and the deployment of high-speed internet across the country. He also emphasized the importance of mapping as an essential part of expanding broadband services in rural areas.

“The Navajo Nation is thankful to Assistant Speaker Luján for introducing this bill to help tribal communities and this is certainly a bill that we support,” President Nez stated.

With New Mexico Public Regulation Commission members in attendance, President Nez noted that there remains an opportunity for the Public Regulation Commission to support Navajo workers at San Juan Generating Station through benefits in the state of New Mexico’s Energy Transition Act, which includes the Energy Transition Economic Development Assistance funding, Energy Transition Displaced Worker Assistance funding as well as the Energy Transition Indian Affairs Fund.

“This funding will greatly assist the displaced workers and their families. We need the support of the Public Regulation Commission for the workers that will be displaced when the plant closes in 2022. This funding can be used to retrain the workers and build upon the skills they gained at the plant to work in other fields including the telecommunications industry,” said President Nez.

President Nez also highlighted several steps that the Navajo Nation is taking to expand telecommunications and broadband services for Navajo communities including the creation of a

PHOTO: (left to right) Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez, U.S. House Assistant Speaker Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.), and Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission Office Executive Director Christopher Becenti at the Rural Networks Conference in Farmington, N.M. on July 31, 2019.
“cyber team” that is tasked with evaluating and advising the executive and legislative branches on future policies related to IT, telecom, and broadband issues in order to close the “digital divide” and ensure that Navajo residents have access to broadband services, including safety communications.

Under the direction of President Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer, the cyber group is working in partnership with the Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission Office under Executive Director Christopher Becenti and commission members.

President Nez also touched on the expansion of broadband fiber that was made available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act several years ago, which is in need of further expansion to serve more homes, chapters, and other stakeholders.

The Nez-Lizer Administration also continues to encourage eligible Navajo families to take advantage of the Universal Service Administration Company Lifeline Phone and Internet Assistance Program, to reduce or eliminate the cost of telecommunication services. Individuals are considered eligible for a Lifeline benefit if they are currently enrolled in one of the following programs:

- Medicaid
- SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or Food Stamps
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Federal Public Housing Assistance
- Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit
- Reside on tribal lands and participate in one of the federal or state assistance programs listed above or one of the following Tribal-state programs – Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance, Head State, Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or Food Distribution Program
- Income based eligibility at or below 135% of the federal poverty guidelines

President Nez also noted that the Nez-Lizer Administration is working to expand broadband services to thousands of Navajo homes and businesses through the Connect America Funds Navajo Communications.

The Rural Networks Conference also offered several panel discussions on topics including business planning as it relates to broadband and telecommunications, engineering and broadband deployment, the Lifeline Phone and Internet Assistance Program, telecommunications on Native lands, and rural areas, connectivity, economic growth, and success stories.

“Thank you to the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission for hosting the Rural Networks Conference. We look forward to working closely with the telecommunications industry leaders to address right-of-way issues to expand broadband services to Navajo families, schools, businesses, first responders, and many others who contribute greatly to our Navajo communities,” stated President Nez.

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