

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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NAVAJO PRESIDENT JOE SHIRLEY, JR., N.M. LAND COMMISSIONER SIGN AGREEMENT LEGALIZING NAVAJO HOMES AFTER 94 YEARS

SANTA FE, N.M. — Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., and New Mexico Public Land Commissioner Patrick H. Lyons signed an agreement Tuesday to formally remove 127 Navajo families' homes from trespass status in the checkerboard area of the Eastern Navajo Agency.

The Home Site Improvement Package agreement affects 17 Navajo chapters over a 16,000-acre area in New Mexico state land. Now, after having waited decades, families there will be allowed to have electricity, gas, plumbing, sewers, running water and telephones available for the first time.

"This is a festive day. It's a good day for many of my people living in northwest New Mexico," President Shirley said. "It's all about working together and recognizing we're all on the same side."

He said this agreement will allow these families to regain a measure of individual sovereignty that been denied because they were unable to obtain basic services.

"To stand on one's own feet takes infrastructure," the President said. "It takes power, water, fiber optics cable, telephone, roads. If you have all of these things, you have every chance in the world of doing good in the world, standing on one's own feet."

Commissioner Lyons said he didn't really see the Navajo homes as illegal because Native lands were inadvertently included when Congress gave land to the state of New Mexico in 1912.

"We really worked well with the Navajo land division. We couldn't have done it without their help," he said. "This day marks a milestone in the history of the land office and the Navajo Nation, and the beginning of a new friendship."

The Navajo Nation has held a grazing lease covering 118,000 acres in the area since 1932. However, even though Navajos have lived in the area for generations, these families have been considered in trespass by the state because of a lack of documentation, said Mike Halona, manager of the Navajo Land Department. He said over decades land exchanges and purchases had been proposed but no agreements had been reached until Tuesday.

"We looked at all options to try to make it work and this is the mechanism that we found," he said. "The question was how to legalize these homes."

Commissioner Lyons said the issue came to light when a utility company found it could not extend services to Navajo families because a right-of-way did not exist. He said during the 2004 legislature, Sen. Leonard Tsosie and Majority Leader Ken Martinez brought the issue to his attention.

The Land Office listed the Navajo homes as improvements that typically include projects such as fences, wells, wildlife drinkers and pipelines.

The Navajo Nation obtained a \$250,000 appropriation from the N.M. legislature to pay for the trespass over the years.

Among the chapters affected are Baca, Becenti, Bread Springs, Chichiltah, Church Rock, Counselor, Lake Valley, Little Water, Lybrock, Manuelito, Pinedale, Ramah, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tsayatoh, Torreon and White Rock.

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CONTACT

George Hardeen, Communications Director
Office of the President and Vice President
The Navajo Nation
Ofc: 928-871-7917
Cell: 928-309-8532
georgehardeen@opvp.org