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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Navajo Nation Public Safety Committee Chair presents testimony for the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Hope MacDonald-Lone Tree, chairperson of the Public Safety Committee of the Navajo Nation Council, provided written testimony outlining the Public Safety Committee's views on the President's Fiscal Year 2008 Budget Request for tribal programs for the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Oversight Hearing held last Thursday, Feb. 15.

Chairperson MacDonald-Lone Tree informed the committee members that the continued use of a flawed formula and the proposed budget cuts in Indian Programs in the fiscal year 2008 Justice Department budget outweigh a positive trend in BIA law enforcement funding.

"The President's fiscal year 2008 budget continues a positive trend of adding resources for Indian Country law enforcement in the BIA budget," MacDonald-Lone Tree said, adding that the increased funding is greatly appreciated by the Navajo Nation. "The President has proposed a 10 percent increase in law enforcement funding in the fiscal year 2008 BIA law enforcement budget from the fiscal year level, while essentially holding public safety construction funding even with 2007."

However, Chairperson MacDonald-Lone Tree explained that the gains in the BIA budget were outweighed by the Department of Justice budget proposal to eliminate several grant programs vital to Indian tribes, including The Correctional Facilities on Tribal Lands Program.

Chairperson MacDonald-Lone Tree urged the Committee and Congress to maintain the Correctional Facilities on Tribal Lands Program in fiscal year 2008, and to provide \$50 million for this program to meet the dire needs for more detention facilities in Indian Country, especially for the Navajo Nation.

She said the Navajo Nation has two primary concerns that are "while the President's Budget would provide critically needed funding for detention facility operation and repair, virtually all of that funding is directed at BIA facilities, while the Navajo Nation, which has 34.2 percent of the on-reservation Indian population, gets no funding for its decaying facilities because they are not BIA-owned and operated."

"There has been a great deal of attention paid in past years to the dangerous state of many Indian Country facilities," MacDonald-Lone Tree said. "The BIA has moved to address this situation, but only with its own facilities."

The Navajo facilities are widely known as posing a danger both to staff and inmates, yet the Navajo Nation facilities have not received the benefit of this funding, according to MacDonald-Lone Tree.

“The Navajo Nation urges the Congress to direct the BIA to apply a fair portion of this funding to addressing the detention facility crisis on the Navajo Nation,” she said. “This has clearly been to the detriment of the Indian population on the Navajo Nation, which is 34.2 percent of the entire on-reservation Indian population in the United States, but the Navajo Nation receives approximately 12 percent of the BIA public safety dollars. The Navajo Nation urges the Congress to direct the BIA to establish a sound, policy-based funding formula for the distribution of these funds.”

She said, “a majority of the increase in the law enforcement budget is due to an extra \$16 million for a Safe Indian Communities Initiative to increase training and staffing of law enforcement and detention facility personnel on tribal lands to combat the spread of methamphetamine.”

“This increase in funding is necessary to help fight the growing problem of methamphetamine in Indian Country and is appreciated by the Navajo Nation,” MacDonald-Lone Tree added. “However, the need for resources for law enforcement in Indian Country is so great that this increase will not adequately resolve the shortfall in police and detention personnel facing Indian public safety agencies.”

She highlighted that the “Fiscal Year 2008 Department Highlights,” documents outlining the Safe Indian Communities Initiative states that the new funding will, “increase the percent of BIA/tribal law enforcement agencies that are on par with recommended national staffing levels from 38 percent in 2007 to 40 percent in 2012.”

MacDonald-Lone Tree said the “increase help, but the need for law enforcement staffing assistance in Indian communities is much greater.

Since returning from Washington, D.C., Chairperson MacDonald-Lone Tree and the Navajo Nation Public Safety Committee members renewed their efforts to raise awareness of the state of Navajo public safety and to work to address the crime fighting ability of Navajo Police Officers and personnel.

“With only .05 police officers for every 1,000 Navajo people, the Navajo Nation must do all it can to increase police officers in our communities,” she said. “We must work to provide these courageous men and women with the equipment and training they need to ensure their safety and the safety of our communities.”