Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., Code Talker Frank Chee Willeto attend White House signing of Omnibus Public Lands Management Act

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., and Navajo Code Talker Frank Chee Willeto of Crownpoint, N.M., were guests of President Barack Obama at the White House today for the signing of the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009, the first bill passed by the U.S. Senate this year.

President Shirley and Mr. Willeto were seated in the front row and greeted President Obama when he concluded his remarks about the historic land and water legislation – H.R. 146.

"It is an extraordinary and wonderful day when both our honored Navajo Code Talkers and the Navajo Nation are acknowledged in the sacred halls of the White House by the President of the United States," President Shirley said. "We owe many thanks to many people but on this day especially to President Obama and Senator Jeff Bingaman."

Included in the law is the authorization of the San Juan River Water Rights Settlement between the Navajo Nation and the State of New Mexico. The law clarifies the administration of Navajo Lake reservoir releases by affirming water quantities and distribution for projects such as the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project. It also designates more than two million acres across nine states as wilderness.

"It's hard to overstate the real and measurable impact this will have on people's lives," President Obama said. "People like Frank Chee Willeto, a Navajo Code Talker in World War II, who's joined us today. And because of this legislation, Frank, along with 80,000 others in the Navajo Nation, will have access to clean running water for the very first time."
Interior Secretary Ken Salazar called enactment of the bill "a Herculean first step in President Obama’s agenda for our open lands."

"It would not have happened without the patient and tireless efforts of the people in this room and Americans across the country, hard-working citizens who are saving historic sites in their communities so that we never forget our past; tribal leaders who are forging solutions to complex and long-standing natural resource challenges."

The legislation contains the authorization for the construction of the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project, an $870 million water delivery system for Navajo communities from Shiprock to Gallup. The project would provide water to the Eastern Navajo Agency, including Window Rock.

Some 37,764 water acre-feet would be used for the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project.

President Obama called it among the most important legislation in decades "to protect, preserve and pass down our nation’s most treasured landscapes to future generations."

"As Americans we possess few blessings greater than the vast and varied landscapes that stretch the breadth of our continent," he said. "Our lands have always provided great

bounty, food and shelter for the First Americans, forsettlers and pioneers, the raw materials that grew our industry, the energy that powers our economy. What these gifts require in return is our wise and responsible stewardship."

President Obama said the law had the backing of Americans from across the country.

"Ranchers and fishermen, small business owners, environmentalists, conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats, on the local, state and federal levels all united around the idea that there should be places that we must preserve," he said. "This legislation guarantees that we will not take our forests, rivers, oceans, national parks, monuments and wilderness areas for granted. But rather we will set them aside and guard their sanctity for everyone to share."

He said the law protects treasured places from the Appalachians in western Virginia to Michigan’s upper peninsula, from the canyons of Idaho to the sandstone cliffs of Utah, from the Sierra Nevadas in California to the Badlands of Oregon."

The law will protect millions of acres of federal land as wilderness, protect more than 1,000 miles of rivers through the National Wild and Scenic River System, and designate thousands of miles of trails for the National Trails System. It also will authorize the 26 million-acre National Landscape Conservation System within the Department of the Interior.

Among other provisions, H.R. 146 designates three new units in our National Park System, enlarges the boundaries of several existing parks, and designates a number of National Heritage Areas.

It creates a new national monument -- the Prehistoric Trackways National Monument — and four new national conservation areas, and establishes the Wyoming Range Withdrawal Area. It establishes a collaborative landscape-scale restoration program with a goal of reducing the risk of wildfire and authorizes programs to study and research the effects of climate change on natural resources and other research-related activities.

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Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., greets President Barack Obama at the White House Monday following his remarks about the of the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009. White House Photo/Pete Souza

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