FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Resources and Development Committee discusses the impacts of oil drilling in the Eastern Navajo Agency

PUEBLO PINTADO, N.M. – The Resources and Development Committee received a report on Tuesday from RDC member Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) regarding oil drilling operations on federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management near the community of Counselor in the Eastern Navajo Agency.

Delegate Tsosie described the impacts of the oil drilling operation on Counselor residents, roads, and safety.

“The Navajo people living in Counselor have had their everyday activities disrupted by oil producers,” said Delegate Tsosie. “These oil producers use a method called ‘horizontal drilling’ and I am concerned that the oil companies are not only disrupting the residents, but also drilling oil from under Navajo land allotments.”

According to Delegate Tsosie, the BLM has created a Research Management Plan for the oil drilling operation, leading to the approval of oil drilling leases on BLM lands near Counselor.

“The oil leases were approved without consultation with the Navajo Nation,” noted Delegate Tsosie. “The Nation needs to meet with the Bureau of Land Management to explore how we can work this out.”

Delegate Tsosie stressed that any corrective action must be strategic, as current oil operations could possibly pose an economic threat to the Navajo Exchange Legislative Initiative.

The Navajo Exchange Legislative Initiative seeks to consolidate Bureau of Land Management Lands in the Navajo Eastern Agency and place the land into trust.

Brandon Velivis, economic development advisor for Ojo Encino Chapter, explained the challenges of enforcing effective land use plans in the Eastern Navajo Agency due to the vastness of Navajo checkerboard lands.

“Land use plans and environmental impact statements must include potential impacts to cultural and economic resources on tribal lands,” said Velivis. “These impacts were considered because of the mix of tribal, federal, and allotted lands, thus there is no adherence to Navajo cultural customs or community safety.”
Delegate Tsosie added that the oil operation has lead to an increase in noise and traffic in Counselor, upsetting many residents.

“In Counselor, you will see the operation’s smoke emissions close to traditional Navajo hogans and roads that are constantly being damaged by tractors and oil trucks,” Delegate Tsosie said.

Following the presentation, RDC member Council Delegate Leonard H. Pete (Chinle) expressed deep concern for the residents, adding that he would like the issue addressed immediately to prevent prolonged challenges for the community.

“We need to resolve this looking at the problem from all angles,” said Delegate Pete. “This is an issue where all parties need to be on the same page.”

RDC vice chair Council Delegate Roscoe Smith (Crystal, Fort Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill) reminded his committee colleagues to remain mindful of political interests when seeking a possible solution.

“We need to acknowledge the political processes tied to the drilling and determine the best process to remedy a solution,” Delegate Smith said. “I am very interested to see if the Research Management Plan can be re-opened to address concerns of the chapter and the Nation.”

In response to the committee’s comments, Delegate Tsosie explained that the issue has resulted in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Eastern Navajo Land Commission working together to address the jurisdictional complexities.

“This situation is exactly where a government-to-government relationship needs to occur,” said Delegate Tsosie. “The operation is occurring entirely on BLM lands, but we don’t know what’s going on underground.”

RDC chair Council Delegate Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) suggested the committee create a directive requesting the Navajo Department of Justice to consult with the committee about the issue.

“I believe the Navajo Nation can work to delay the operation by working together and possibly finding a way to compete with these oil producers,” said Delegate Benally.

Delegate Tsosie expressed support for Delegate Benally’s directive, adding that he would sponsor legislation to acquire the resources to further investigate the Nation’s interests in the oil operation.

RDC members voted 5-0 to support a directive to Navajo Department of Justice, requesting consultation with the RDC to review the Nation’s interests in the oil drilling operation.

RDC members accepted the report with a vote of 5-0.

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