



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 8, 2013

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Naabik'iyáti' Committee and Budget and Finance Committee approve \$3 million EPA grant to rebuild homes affected by abandoned uranium mines

WINDOW ROCK – The Naabik'iyáti' Committee passed legislation on Wednesday approving and accepting a \$3 million grant awarded to the Navajo Nation by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in July 2012, to rebuild housing structures that were demolished due to contamination by abandoned uranium mines.

Legislation No. 0030-13, sponsored by Council Delegate Elmer Begay (Dilkon, Greasewood Springs, Indian Wells, Teesto, Whitecone), will provide the Community Housing and Infrastructure Department with funding to repair and rebuild nine housing units across the reservation, according to Freida White, Navajo Nation EPA Superfund Program Supervisor.

Contaminated homes are usually found within a quarter-mile of an abandoned uranium mine, White said. Contamination also occurs when people use materials found at abandoned uranium mine sites to construct new homes.

The legislation was first considered by the Resources and Development Committee on Feb. 12, which referred it to the Budget and Finance Committee with a “do pass” recommendation with no amendments.

At the BFC meeting on Wednesday, Delegate Begay said the federal funds would be used to cover expenses such as labor force, schedules, materials, construction, design specifications, and community and technical assistance.

The BFC voted to approve the legislation with four supporting and zero opposing, but not before some committee members expressed concerns over the legislative process and how efficiently the funds would be dispersed and utilized.

BFC member, Council Delegate Nelson BeGaye (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaile/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch' izhi) questioned why it took so long for this legislation to come before the BFC.

“This goes all the way back to 2012 and we’re finally approving it,” Delegate BeGaye remarked.

Council Delegate LoRenzo Bates, BFC Chair (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland), asked if the funds would be expended efficiently referring to

legislation language which states that the federal grant funding is for work conducted from Mar. 12, 2012 through Oct. 31, 2013.

“You’re going to be expending \$3 million. Are we going to get all this money expended between now and then — efficiently?” Delegate Bates questioned.

White assured that the funds will be spent adequately. She highlighted that the construction schedule begins this summer, and that the projects will be completed on time.

On Thursday when the legislation came before the Naabik’íyátí Committee, it was met with strong support from delegates who welcomed the funding in order to help Navajo people long affected by the consequences of uranium mining.

Council Delegate Lorenzo Curley (Houck, Klagetoh, Nahata Dziil, Tsé Si áni, Wide Ruins) commended the efforts of the Navajo Nation EPA saying, “It’s good to see an effort being made to address these homes and buildings that are abandoned because of hazardous material.”

Delegate Curley went on to recommend that the Navajo Nation EPA assess old buildings in communities throughout the reservation, and continue to work with the Council to address more hazardous waste issues.

Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill), however, opposed the legislation citing concern over the risk of liability that the tribe assumes by having the Community Housing and Infrastructure Department — a Navajo Nation entity — construct the homes.

If anything should go wrong during or after construction of the homes, the Navajo Nation is assuming liability, said Delegate Witherspoon.

Delegate Witherspoon further suggested having the Navajo Nation Department of Justice review such risks in the future to ensure the Nation’s protection from liability claims.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Naabik’íyátí’ Committee voted to approve the legislation with 13 supporting and 1 opposing.

The Navajo Nation EPA, along with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is expected to begin meeting with affected families next week to begin the rebuilding process.

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