



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

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Navajo Nation Council meets with New Mexico Congresswoman Yvette Herrell

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PHOTO: Chariman Rick Nez, Council Delegate Mark Freeland, and Navajo Nation Washington Office's Executive Director Santee Lewis advocate for Navajo allottees in Washington, D.C.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Earlier this week, members of the Resources and Development Committee (RDC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council hosted a meeting with United States Representative Yvette Herrell (R-NM) to advocate for congressional field hearings to allow communities to provide public testimony for allottee families impacted in the Chaco Culture National Historic Site and on the impact of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation.

“We thank Congresswoman Yvette Herrell for welcoming us to Washington D.C. and for listening to our concerns from the Navajo people. Many of our families are suffering from the legacy of uranium mining and this toxic mineral has poisoned our communities for decades now. Congress has a trust obligation to protect the Navajo Nation and clean up the abandoned uranium pits located near many of our homesteads. A congressional hearing has to happen so our representatives can hear directly from the survivors still living today,” said Chairman Rickie Nez (T'iistsoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tsé Daa K'aan, Newcomb, San Juan).

Representative Herrell represents the largest congressional district in New Mexico located in the southern portion of the state. As a member of the Committee on Natural Resources, she serves on the National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee and as Vice Ranking Member of the Energy and Minerals Development Subcommittee.

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“There remains over 500+ abandoned uranium mines across the Navajo Nation, many remain open and ready to poison our people if not cleaned up. Last year, I sponsored the resolution passed by the Navajo Nation Council that officially requests a United States congressional hearing to be conducted within the Navajo Nation on the long term effects of uranium on the health of our people. The federal government has an obligation to clean up these toxic sites now. It was Navajo uranium that aided in the protection of our country, so we must never forget that. The Navajo people deserve an answer from the United States government now,” said Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay Jr. (Tachee/Blue Gap, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tselani/Cottonwood, Low Mountain).

In 2019, the Naabik’iyátí’ Committee passed Resolution No. NABIJA 05-20, establishing the official position of the Navajo Nation settling for a 5-mile buffer zone within and around the greater Chaco Canyon area and allows Navajo allottees to further advance any development as landowners while protecting Navajo natural resources.

“We appreciate Congresswoman Herrell for her advocacy on behalf of our tribes in New Mexico. It is imperative she has an understanding of the situation in the Chaco Canyon area and how our Navajo families with allotments will be severely impacted if we establish a 10-mile buffer zone. The Navajo Nation has compromised over and over again, so our request for a 5-mile buffer zone should be respected. A congressional hearing needs to happen so our Navajo people get a fair chance to tell their story as well. The federal government needs to respect our sovereignty and properly consult with the Navajo people to be impacted in the Chaco Canyon region,” said Council Delegate Mark Freeland (Becenti, Lake Valley, Náhodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint).

In November, President Joe Biden announced a 20-year ban on oil and gas drilling within a 10-mile radius of the Chaco Culture Heritage Withdrawal Area in northwestern New Mexico.

“As the governing body of the Navajo Nation, we continue to reaffirm our opposition to the Biden Administration’s proposal of this ban within a 10-mile radius of the Chaco Canyon region. Our Navajo families in the affected area need to be heard and the cultural resources study must be completed before any major decisions are made. The federal government has a trust responsibility to respect Navajo sovereignty and our official position that is supported by all our leadership,” said Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh).

Following the announcement from the Interior Department, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer sent a joint letter to President Joe Biden reaffirming the Navajo Nation position for a 5-mile buffer zone within and around the greater Chaco Canyon area.

Representative Yvette Herrell shared her support for the field hearings and her commitment to uplift the voices of Navajo families affected in the Chaco Canyon area. She added, “The Navajo people have a long history of protecting this country and have given so much to the United States. We must not forget that history and I am committed to working with my colleagues to make sure every voice is heard.”

On January 26, 2021, the Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships was signed by President Biden. This document directs all federal agencies to honor tribal sovereignty and include the voices of tribes in policy deliberations that affect their communities.