



Contact: Erny Zah
Director of Communications
Cell: (928) 380-0771
navajonationpress@navajo-nsn.gov

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Navajo President Shelly Says Navajo Nation is Capable of Running Buy-Back Program



President Ben Shelly (center) speaks with Navajo Regional BIA Director Sharon Pinto (left) during a tribal government-to-government consultation about the Department of Interior's Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. – Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly said to the Department of Interior that the Navajo Nation is capable of implementing the recently announced a Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations.

Wednesday's meeting was the first government-to-government consultation between DOI and the Navajo Nation about the buy-back program, which was announced on Tuesday.

"Navajo Nation has the capability to acquire lands efficiently which provides an opportunity to the Navajo people to maximize their interest and provided a valuation methods through the Buy-Back Program," President Shelly said.

“Navajo Nation strongly recommends for the American Indian Trust Land funds to be allocated directly to Navajo Nation through a contract to administer the Buy-Back land for its Navajo people,” President Shelly added.

As part of the program, DOI has made \$1.9 billion available to American Indian tribes to buy allotted lands that have multiple owners. The Navajo Nation’s portion is about \$103 million to potentially buy 4,355 tracts of land that have multiple owners.

The program would only buy land from owners who agree to sell their land.

John McClanahan, program manager for the Land Buy-Back Program, said the program plans to have multiple meetings to with Navajo leaders, allotment landowners and other interested parties.

“We want to make sure we are tailoring the program to the unique needs of the Navajo Nation,” McClanahan said during his opening presentation.

Another suggestion President Shelly presented was that lands that are purchased under the program should have environmental clearances to reduce environmental liabilities.

“This will strengthen the chapters on Navajo Nation and the opportunity to enhance residential, community and economic development through their comprehensive community land use plans,” President Shelly said.

Sharon Pinto, Navajo Region director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, said having a centralized location for the program would make it easier for landowners to learn about the Buy-Back Program.

“I think it is important to have a centralized location for landowners. We need to take this and move it forward to make it successful,” Pinto said.

Navajo Chief of Staff Arbin Mitchell said the buy-back program could help achieve rights of ways for new projects since some allotment lands have multiple owners.

“If one says no, that puts the whole project on hold or we have to change plans,” Mitchell said.

President Shelly stated after the meeting that though New Mexico has the most fractionalized allotted lands, the Navajo Nation has to be concerned with the needs of all Navajo allottees, including allottees in Arizona and Utah.

“We have Navajo families in all three states that have allotted lands. We have to listen to all the people about how we can make this program work for them,” President Shelly said.

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