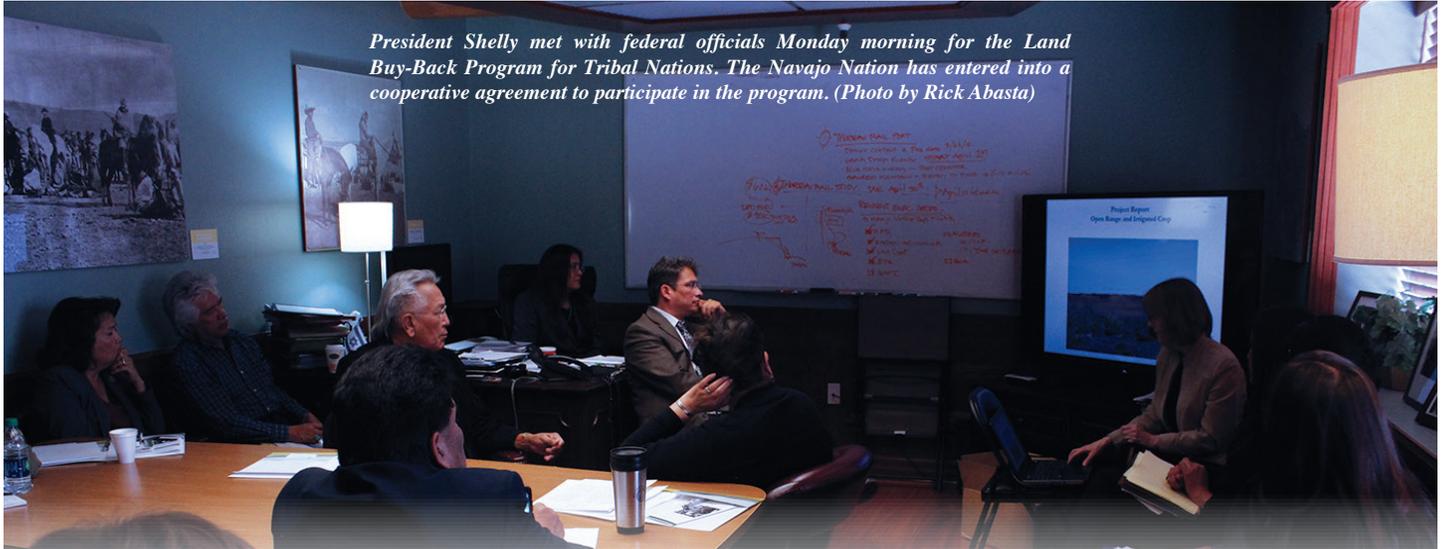




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President Shelly meets with Land Buy-Back Program for Indian Nations



President Shelly met with federal officials Monday morning for the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations. The Navajo Nation has entered into a cooperative agreement to participate in the program. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.— Officials from the U.S. Department of Interior met with President Ben Shelly this morning to discuss benefits of the Navajo Nation's participation in the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations.

Established by Interior Department, the Buy-Back Program is for tribal nations to implement the land consolidation provisions of the Cobell settlement agreement.

The settlement provided \$1.9 billion for the Trust Land Consolidation Fund to consolidate fractional land interests across Indian Country. Approximately 150 tribal nations are participating in the program.

Representatives from the Office of the President and Vice President, Navajo Land Department, Navajo Department of Justice, Bureau of Indian Affairs and Interior Department met at tribal headquarters for the two-hour presentation.

President Shelly said public outreach with Navajo allottees was necessary to provide

education and answer frequently asked questions.

The headquarters for the Buy-Back Program is in Crownpoint, with satellite offices in Farmington, Gallup and Winslow, Ariz. Approximately 150 tribal reservations with fractional interests are participating in the program.

President Shelly said, "The cooperative agreement is a product of significant planning and coordination with the Navajo Nation since 2013."

Beyond the need for public outreach to allottees, President Shelly said other considerations looming in the horizon must be monitored.

"I opposed legislation during the recent New Mexico State Legislative Session where private interests attempted to form a group to study federal land," he said.

The Navajo Nation, Apache Nations and Pueblos stood united against House Bill 291, which was related to public lands for the creation of the N.M. Federal Land Management

Commission.

"When you think about it, what land was the commission going to study? Probably a lot of (allotted tribal lands)," President Shelly said. "A lot of states right now want to eliminate federal lands.

"Arizona tried it. New Mexico tried it. Utah is thinking about it. They said federal land is costing too much. They want to turn it into private land for tax purposes," he added.

According to the program website, "The Buy-Back Program allows interested individual owners to receive payments for voluntarily selling their land. All interests sold are restored to tribes, which helps to keep Indian lands in trust for tribal communities."

Santee Lewis, senior advisor on tribal relations for the Land Buy-Back Program, said land fractionation is serious problem for Indian Country.

"Our program was created as a result of the Cobell settlement. We have a \$1.9 billion fund to purchase lands in 146 locations

in Indian Country," Lewis said.

She said the program must follow five parameters for land purchases: the land must be from fractionated interests, held in trust or restricted land status, purchased at fair market value, and must be purchased from willing sellers within a 10-year period.

"We only purchase lands from willing sellers. Participation in our program is purely voluntary," Lewis said.

The Navajo Nation's participation in the program is outlined in the cooperative agreement.

"Land is something that I will always support. Purchase it whenever you can," President Shelly said. "It'll always be there. We'll be gone, but the land will be there."

The Buy-Back Program will be in operation for the next seven years working toward the goal of consolidating fractionated tribal lands.