



The Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President

CONTACTS:
Jared Touchin, Communications Director
(928) 274-4275

Crystalyne Curley, Sr. Public Information Officer
(928) 274-2758

nnopvp.communications@gmail.com

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President Nez advocates for CARES Act funding extension and reaffirms opposition to reopening of Grand Canyon with Secretary of the Interior



PHOTO: Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez meeting with U.S. Secretary of the Interior David L. Bernhardt in Albuquerque, N.M. on May 20, 2020.

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. – Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez recently met with U.S. Secretary of the Interior David L. Bernhardt, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs John Tahsuda, and Navajo Area BIA Director Bart Stevens, to discuss CARES Act funding (CFR) for the Navajo Nation, a recent Executive Order from the White House that addresses federal regulations, and to reaffirm the Navajo Nation’s opposition to reopening the Grand Canyon National Park.

Nearly six-weeks after Congress approved the CARES Act funding and following a lawsuit filed by the Navajo Nation and other tribes to secure their share, the Navajo Nation received a 60-percent portion of the CARES Act allocation which totaled \$600 million. In a written letter to Secretary Bernhardt, President Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer requested his support for an extension beyond the Dec. 30 deadline to use the funds.

“Elimination of the CRF deadline will provide the time and care needed to do our due diligence to identify and implement measures to address the comprehensive needs of the Navajo Nation in response to COVID-19. There are immediate needs that can easily be identified and addressed from now until December 30, 2020, but in order to properly prepare for the projected “waves” of COVID-19 and future pandemics, a reasonable amount of additional time is needed to implement necessary projects well past 2020,” the letter stated.

On May 19, President Trump signed an Executive Order on “regulatory relief to support economic recovery,” which states that federal agencies “should address this economic emergency by rescinding, modifying, waiving, or providing exemptions from regulations and other requirements that may inhibit economic recovery, consistent with applicable law and with protection of the public health and safety, with national and homeland security, and with budgetary priorities and operational feasibility.”

During the meeting with Secretary Bernhardt on Wednesday, President Nez informed him that he and Vice President Lizer created an internal work group to identify federal regulations that may align with the purpose the White House’s Executive Order, to expedite the use of the \$600 million in CARES Act funding for water and electrical infrastructure development and other critical projects that would benefit the Navajo Nation.

“We respectfully request that the Department of the Interior support our effort to empower tribes with the ability to waive or streamline the Environmental Impact Statement process and environmental assessment requirements for emergency situations like COVID-19 rather than waiting for the completion of an EIS and EA for each project,” wrote President Nez.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, President Nez and Vice President Lizer advocated for the closure of Grand Canyon National Park due to the high numbers of tourists that travel through the Navajo Nation to gain access to the park, which increases the risk of the spread of COVID-19. The Navajo Nation has temporarily restricted travel to tourists on the Navajo Nation and continues its closure of tribal parks within the Navajo Nation as well.

The Navajo Nation has repeatedly called for a full partnership with the National Park Service in letters issued on March 24 and April 13 addressed to Secretary Bernhardt, as well as National Park Service Deputy Director Raymond Vela and Bureau of Land Management Acting Director William Perry Pendley. To date, there has been no official response.

“The Navajo Nation should be at the table with NPS Superintendents or appointed delegates when meeting with external partners, stakeholders, and state government officials on NPS activities that impact our mutual interests. The impacts of reopening these parks that are near, border, or are within the Navajo Nation must be considered in the NPS Reopening Plans. We fear that insufficient consultation or planning could ignite a possible second, third, or even fourth wave of this virus, if we don’t work together to ensure the protection of our communities,” stated President Nez in the written letter to Secretary Bernhardt.

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