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Navajo leaders discuss Navajo Indian Irrigation Project and Chaco Canyon issues with U.S. Senator Ben Ray Luján

DZILTH-NA-O-DITH-HLE, N.M. – On Thursday, Navajo Nation leaders met with U.S. Sen. Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.) regarding the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project (NIIP) at the Navajo Agriculture Products Industry (NAPI) site near Farmington, N.M. and issues related to the protection and leasing of lands near Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

Navajo Agricultural Products Industry (NAPI) officials provided a tour of the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project (NIIP) to Sen. Luján, Navajo Nation Vice President Myron Lizer, members of 24th Navajo Nation Council, and Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Santee Lewis. During the visit, they also discussed initiatives and funding shortfalls that continue to impact the current condition of the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project, which is federally owned, operated, and maintained by NAPI through a Public Law 93-638 federal contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. NIIP’s purpose includes delivering water to approximately 110,630 acres of farm land on the Navajo Nation.

“The main focus of Senator Luján’s visit reflects our priorities for NIIP. Most importantly, the operations and maintenance shortfalls and the completion of NIIP need to be addressed by the federal government, which is obligated to fund and complete. We are confident that Senator Luján will assist in upholding the federal government to its obligations enacted by Congress. By doing so, NAPI can improve their current infrastructure and continue to expand operations and increase their economic potential,” said Vice President Lizer.

NAPI CEO Dave Zeller and Operations and Maintenance Manager, Lionel Haskie, highlighted the need for operations, maintenance, and replacement funding to sustain the Navajo Indian
Irrigation Project. Operations and management funding from the federal government for NIIP is inadequate to cover replacement costs, added Zeller. According to Haskie, many of the pumping plants, substations, and conveyance systems built prior to 1985 are now reaching the end of their service life. Constant repairs and unplanned outages have increased due to the deterioration and aging equipment.

Through the Water Infrastructure Improvement for the Nation (WIIN) Act, (17) federally owned Indian Irrigation Projects are eligible to receive a fraction of $10 million per year to address deferred maintenance and replacement costs. NIIP is awarded $2.335 million per year to address deferred maintenance. The Navajo Nation and NAPI have requested to maximize the authorized WIIN Act amount to $35 million in FY 2022, so NIIP can receive a larger amount of WIIN Act dollars. The BIA completed an inventory of the NIIP system in 2016 and identified over $174 million of remediation costs. A $35 million annual amount appropriated under WIIN would be needed to fund the high capital replacement cost.

“In addition to the shortfalls, NIIP’s priorities include the completion of Block 9, which the U.S. government has ignored for many years. NAPI has a huge challenge developing the block. However, with the help of Sen. Luján, we can help move the process forward. I thank Sen. Luján, NAPI, and the 24th Navajo Nation Council for meeting and bringing these issues to the forefront once again,” added Vice President Lizer. Council Delegates Rickie Nez, Kee Allen Begay, Jr., Pernell Halona, and Eugenia Charles-Newton were also in attendance to support and advocate on behalf of NAPI and the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project.

Following the NAPI meeting, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez, Speaker Seth Damon, and Council Delegates Mark Freeland, Daniel Tso, Jamie Henio, and Rickie Nez met with Sen. Luján at Dzilth-Na-O-Dith-Hle School, located in the Eastern Navajo Agency to hear from local residents, chapter officials, and allotment owners regarding concerns over the protection of Chaco Canyon and oil and gas leasing on allotment lands.

Council members requested the meeting with Sen. Luján to allow local community members to voice their concerns over a proposed buffer zone intended to help protect sacred sites and artifacts at Chaco Canyon, which may also impact allotment leasing for oil and gas that benefit Navajo families.

Sen. Luján introduced the Chaco Cultural Heritage Protection Act in 2019, when he was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, which was approved by House members, but did not gain final approval by the Senate. He stated that he is committed to reaching some middle ground that
provides for the protection of Chaco Canyon and allows allotment owners to benefit from their allotment lands.

The Nez-Lizer Administration will continue to work with Sen. Luján, Council members, and local community members to develop solutions and language to move forward with the protection of Chaco Canyon and address the issues of community members.

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