



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Dec. 16, 2024

CONTACT: George Hardeen, Public Relations Director

Email: george.hardeen@navajo-nsn.gov

Cell: 928-810-9174

Navajo President Buu Nygren says removal of Attorney General sends unmistakable message that Navajo government is unstable

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren today expressed regret and disappointment at the Navajo Nation Council's action to remove Attorney General Ethel Branch without stating a reason in its legislation or debate.

He said the action to remove the highest legal officer of the Navajo Nation without explaining its reason to the public sends an unmistakable message to businesses, states, the federal government and other tribes that the

Navajo Nation government is unstable, unreliable and subject to political tampering by a legislature that oversteps its policy-making role.

He said he's concerned today's action could thwart the Nation's initiatives like the Northeastern Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Act and RECA amendments now before Congress that already face an uphill effort.

"Attorney General Branch did a great job," he said. "She delivered several of the most significant water rights settlement agreements in Indian Country to the council in only 19 months when two previous administrations couldn't get it done at all."

At the time of her release, she was leading discussions with Energy Fuels Resources about how or if uranium shipments can be transported across Navajo land, he said.

"Attorney General Branch did a great job. She delivered several of the most significant water rights settlement agreements in Indian Country in only 19 months when two previous administrations couldn't get it done at all."

– Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren

"Attorney General Branch has done an exemplary job that was clearly was unappreciated by this council," he said.

The legislation to remove the Attorney General was sponsored by Shiprock Council Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton, a social media critic of both the Attorney General and President Nygren with a penchant for reporting inaccurate information.

Ms. Branch was confirmed in April 2023 with a vote of 17-3. Charles-Newton was one of the three nay votes.

President Nygren said the Navajo Nation Department of Justice under the Attorney General's guidance saw significant success in the U.S. Supreme Court's upholding of the Indian Child Welfare Act in *Haaland v. Brackeen*.

He said the high court's ruling now ensures the protection of Navajo children's rights in foster care and adoption cases.

AG Branch saw to updating agreements to verify ICWA eligibility in custody cases, expanded the Arizona legal team to facilitate earlier intervention, and began to upgrade the Children's Code to strengthen the Navajo ICWA framework, President Nygren said.

The President cited AG Branch's significant accomplishments on three vital issues:

- Bringing dozens of parties together to achieve the Northeastern Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Agreement and have it introduced in Congress with bipartisan support, among other water right settlements she's overseen.

Previous Administrations were unable to get traction to bring parties together, achieve a settlement, much less get it before Congress, he said.

- Protecting Navajo water rights in the case of *Clark v. Haaland*. The Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed dismissal of New Mexico residents' water rights claims that alleged that state, tribal, and federal defendants violated federal water law.

The Tenth Circuit agreed with the district court that the claims must be dismissed because sovereign immunity prevented the courts from exercising jurisdiction over the Navajo Nation.

- Ensuring that hundreds of the most vulnerable Navajo citizens were no longer taken advantage of and returned to their families or treatment centers through Operation Rainbow Bridge.

President Nygren noted that the council conspicuously took this action to release the Attorney General without stating its reasons publicly. He said that omission will lead only to unfair and unwarranted speculation and hearsay.

###