



The Navajo Nation
Yideeskáądi Nitsáhákees

DR. BUU NYGREN *PRESIDENT*
RICHELLE MONTTOYA *VICE PRESIDENT*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 6, 2024

CONTACT: George Hardeen, Public Relations Director

Email: george.hardeen@navajo-nsn.gov

Cell: 928-810-9174

Navajo President Buu Nygren, Hopi, San Juan Southern Paiute leaders, congratulated for historic water settlement at Getches-Wilkinson Conference

BOULDER, Colo. – Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren today acknowledged 44 years of addressing Western natural resource issues and commended non-Native advocates who worked on behalf of Native people to achieve fairness in their struggle to acquire water rights to the Colorado River.

“I want to commend each and every one of you, our Native partners and our Non-native partner, for your heart and your dedication to really help tribal nations across this country,” President Nygren told 300 participants at the 44th annual Getches-Wilkinson Center Conference on the Colorado River at the University of Colorado here.

“This wouldn't be possible without the relationships that we have, the continued dialogues, the tough discussions that are always happening on how do we make sure that we're equitable?” he said before an audience of water experts, lawyers and tribal leaders from Arizona, Colorado and throughout the West.

“We're all American citizens,” the President said. “We're all citizens of a particular state and, yes, we are citizens of our great tribal nations. But at the same time, we remind them, don't forget about us. We've been wanting water for a very long time.”

The Getches-Wilkinson Center and conference is named for two towering figures in Indian law and natural resource issues. David Getches was dean of the University of Colorado Law School from 2003 until his death in 2011.



Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren joined tribal leaders, water and legal experts and Colorado Gov. Jaris Polis on June 6 at the 44th annual Getches-Wilkinson Center Conference on Natural Resources at the University of Colorado.

He was highly regarded for his expertise in natural resources, water law and Native American law.

Charles Wilkinson was a University of Colorado Law School faculty member since 1957, renowned scholar and expert in Indian law, public land law,

water law and environmental law. He was recognized as one of the foremost authorities on legal issues concerning Native American tribes and their rights.

Colorado River to establish a forum where the “post-2026” process guidelines could be discussed respecting tribal sovereignty.

The post-2026 negotiations are interim guidelines to address the Lower Basin water supply in the Colorado River Basin. The interim guidelines end in 2026.

Currently, there are negotiations concerning what the guidelines will be in place after the year 2026 to define how the river is managed.

“We now have that forum,” Gov. Lewis said. “I call it the 38 Sovereigns. (The Bureau of) Reclamation calls it the federal tribal states working group. Whatever you call it, it’s historic, nonetheless.”

President Nygren agreed, saying there was initial skepticism three tribes could achieve a settlement as they have.

“No one ever thought that in 2024 that the Hopi, the San Juan Southern Paiute and Navajo are going to come together and actually agree on something,” he said. “We did it. We did it because we realize that we share that space together and we realize that there’s a lot of intermarriage. We make up the whole part of northern Arizona, and we might as well make sure we come together and really build a future for our communities because that’s what’s important as all tribal leaders.”

He said the Navajo Nation is participating in the post-2026 negotiations chiefly by reaching a settlement of all its water rights in Arizona.

“This is significant,” he said. “It has taken us decades to get to this point. The U.S. now has a quantified right to the Colorado River System for the Navajo Nation. The settlement identifies policy shifts that the Navajo Nation needs to achieve which is a central goal of the settlement, and that



Gila River Indian Community Governor Stephen R. Lewis introduced President Nygren on the panel and congratulated him, the Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe and San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe on the achievement of an historic water rights settlement.

Gila River Indian Community Governor Stephen R. Lewis introduced President Nygren on the panel and congratulated him, the Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe and San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe for achieving and approving the long-awaited Northeastern Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Agreement.

“There’s still a lot of work ahead to get this finally approved by Congress,” Gov. Lewis said. “I know that you’ve reached a historic milestone, and I want to acknowledge it again today, my good friend.”

Gov. Lewis acknowledged the Colorado River Indian Tribes recent approval of their agreement with Arizona and the United States, calling it another important step forward to implement the Northeastern Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement.

He said he remembered from the 2023 conference that he and tribal leaders called on the United States and Upper and Lower Basin states along the

is to develop water on the Navajo Nation and deliver it to existing Navajo communities.”

He said even in 2024 there remains an estimated 30% of Navajo homes that have no access to clean drinking water.

“I am sure that most of you attending this conference understand how this lack of access at the home level allowed COVID-19 to ravage the Navajo Nation,” he said. “I want to emphasize that the lack of water far exceeds the home level. I ran for President because I want the Navajo Nation to be in a place where our families can thrive and raise our children.”

He grew up without water, he said. But it was his choice to return to the Navajo Nation, build his own home and raise his family on Navajo land.

“Without water, we cannot do that,” he said. “I want to say thank you for being here because this is what's important. The work that you do on a day-to-day basis is how do we continue to exist 100 years from now, 200 years from now, and it all starts with water.”

Before speaking, President Nygren met privately with Colorado Gov. Jaris Polis to brief him on the Arizona settlement agreement. The governor served 10 years in Congress representing Colorado's 2nd congressional district. He became familiar with the Navajo Nation's longstanding battles to obtain water rights during his time as a congressman.

President Nygren invited the governor to visit the Navajo Nation's Wolf Springs Ranch in Westcliffe, Colo. The ranch is located near Mount Blanco, or *Sisnaajini* in the Navajo language, one of the Navajo people's four sacred mountains.

The President noted that key to the Arizona water settlement is that each of the three tribes' councils approved it with unanimous votes last month. The settlement covers one-fourth to one-third of the entire state of Arizona.

The non-Indian parties to the settlement are working through their respective approval processes, and their lawyers have submitted letters of support, he said.

The settlement calls for the Navajo Nation to obtain 44,700 acre-feet per year of the Arizona allocation of Upper Basin Colorado River Water. That represents 90% of Arizona's Upper Basin allocation. It will receive 3,600 acre-feet per year of Fourth Priority Lower Basin Colorado River Water.

The settlement provides for \$5 billion in federal funding to build substantial and much needed water delivery infrastructure, mostly on the Navajo Nation. This includes:

- The *iiná bá – paa tuwaqat'si* pipeline Implementation Fund.

This fund would finance Bureau of Reclamation construction of a pipeline to divert Colorado River water from Lake Powell to deliver Colorado River Upper Basin and Lower Basin Colorado River water to the Navajo chapters of LeChee, Coppermine, Bitter Springs, Cedar Ridge, Bodaway/Gap, Tuba City, Coal Mine Mesa, Cameron and Grey Mountain; Colorado River Water to the San Juan Southern Paiute Southern Tribe; and Colorado River Water to the Hopi Reservation at the combined preliminary estimated cost of \$1.7 billion.

- A Navajo Nation Water Settlement Trust Fund in the amount of \$2.7 billion to fund various other water-related projects and activities to serve Navajo communities. This includes agricultural activities and purchasing of water rights.
- Provision to lease water so revenue can be earned while the Navajo Nation develops and uses water from the settlement on the Nation.

“This settlement for the Navajo Nation means developing water to develop our economy so that my children and other Navajo parents can raise their families on the Navajo Nation,” President Nygren said.

