

JOINT PRESS RELEASE



NAVAJO NATION OFFICE OF THE
PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT

NAVAJO NATION
OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

NAVAJO NATION
WATER RIGHTS COMMISSION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 14, 2024

MEDIA CONTACTS:
george.hardeen@navajo-nsn.gov
mihio.manus@navajo-nsn.gov
ahalepr@gmail.com

Navajo Nation Settlement for Water Claims in the Rio San José, Rio Puerco Basins in New Mexico Up for Consideration by the Navajo Nation Council

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Legislation was introduced before the 25th Navajo Nation Council on Friday, May 10 to approve a settlement addressing the Navajo Nation’s water rights claims in the Rio San José Stream System and the Rio Puerco Basin in New Mexico.

The legislation was sponsored by the Speaker of the Navajo Nation Council, Crystalyne Curley, who said the proposed Settlement marks a transformative moment for the Navajo people, heralding a future of stability and prosperity for Eastern Navajo communities.

“We are immensely proud to announce the Navajo Nation Rio San José Water Rights Settlement, a monumental step forward in securing water sovereignty for our communities. This agreement not only acknowledges our inherent rights but also empowers our communities to manage and sustain our water resources for generations to come. Together, we are ensuring a more resilient and thriving future for the Navajo Nation,” said Speaker Curley.

Once approved by all parties, it will be up for consideration by Congress, likely as part of broader settlement legislation with the Pueblo of Acoma and the Pueblo of Laguna. As drafted, the Settlement Agreement is an addendum to a broader settlement agreement with the Pueblos and a number of other parties. The Navajo settlement is expected to fund infrastructure for water delivery to a number of rural Navajo communities in New Mexico.

The Navajo Nation’s water claims quantified in the settlement include:

- 2,444 AFY of groundwater for the two basins.
- 417 AFY for livestock use.
- 493 AFY additional storage rights for stock ponds in the Rio San José Basin.
- Livestock water rights for the Rio Puerco Basin to be determined later.
- The settlement agreement does not address allottees’ water rights.

The settlement is proposed to cost \$243 million. Funding will go towards wastewater development, chlorination stations, water hauling stations, an operation and maintenance trust fund, a regional water system to import water, and a water acquisition fund.

“This Rio San José Water Rights Settlement legislation represents hope and vital resources for the Navajo communities in New Mexico,” said Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren. “I urge

Congress to act swiftly on the settlement. It's more than just water. It's about health, sustainability and the future of our people. We look to our allies in Congress to help make this a reality."

This settlement will directly impact nine Navajo chapter communities nestled within the Rio San José Basin, including Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Crownpoint, Littlewater, Mariano Lake, Ramah, Smith Lake, Thoreau, and Tóhajiilee, as well as seven chapters within the Rio Puerco Basin: Tóhajiilee, Torreon, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Whitehorse Lake, Counselor, and Littlewater. Many Navajo households in these basins have no running water and have relied on water hauling to meet daily water needs.

"Communities in Navajo's Eastern Agency like Tohajiilee and Smith Lake will finally have access to clean, safe water that they can drink and cook with," Navajo Nation Attorney General Ethel Branch said. "These are communities where water access is scarce or the supply has been contaminated by uranium mining. The Rio San José Stream System Water Rights Settlement Agreement provides a solution to these challenges and will ensure equity in water access for our Eastern Navajo communities."

Funding from the settlement will bring needed waterline extensions and bathroom additions to many families living without these modern conveniences. Livestock will also benefit from settlement water projects, she added.

Existing groundwater supplies are limited and of poor quality. Drought conditions have also impacted available water supplies.

"All across the Navajo Nation, access to water is a major concern for our people," said Navajo Nation Water Rights Commission Chair Joelynn Ashley. "We need water to live, to feed our animals and grow our crops. A water rights settlement for New Mexico communities is needed and wanted by the people."

With the introduction of the settlement agreement legislation, Navajo Nation Council committees will review it before a special session. Public comments can be sent to comments@navajo-nsn.gov.

Learn more at <https://nnwrc.navajo-nsn.gov/>.

###