



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Nov. 20, 2024

CONTACT: George Hardeen, Public Relations Director

Email: george.hardeen@navajo-nsn.gov

Cell: 928-810-9174

Navajo President Buu Nygren tell U.S. Senate committee water purity for 169,000 Navajos was achieved through 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act

'However, last time program fully funded was in 2014'

WASHINGTON – To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren told a U.S. Senate Committee of the Navajo Nation's successes to keep drinking water clean through the federal law.

Speaking today before the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment & Public Works, the President said the Navajo Nation became the first tribe to obtain full primacy to implement the law in 2000.

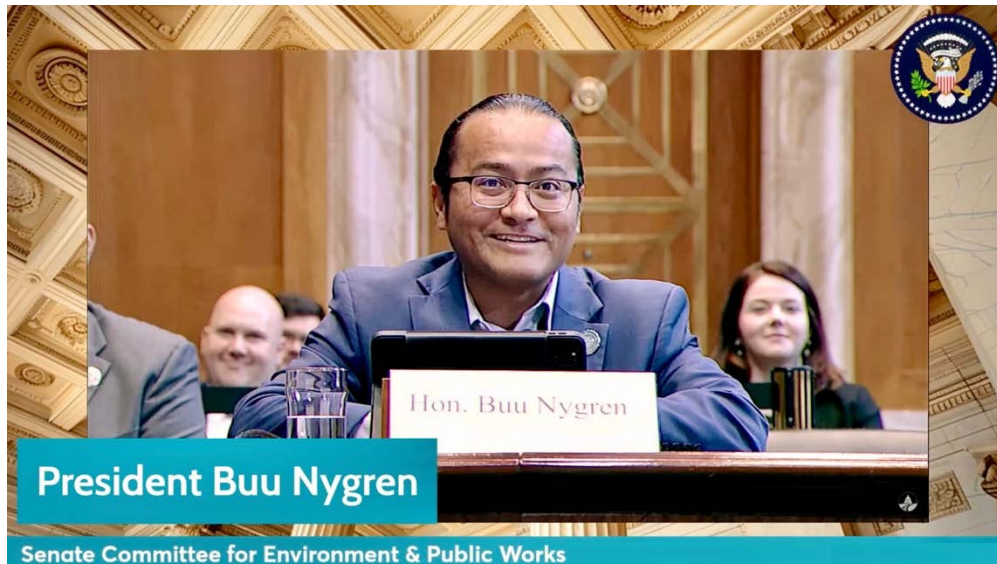
"This historic milestone solidified the Nation's authority to oversee and enforce safe drinking water regulations independently," he said. "Today, the (Public Water Systems Supervision Program) regulates 26 water purveyors responsible for 171 water systems. They provide essential oversight to ensure clean and safe drinking water for approximately 169,200 individuals across the Navajo Nation."

This record shows the Nation's commitment to protect public health and advance sovereignty through self-determination in water management, he

said. But the Nation has not received additional funding for 10 years, he added.

"To maintain compliance with both federal and tribal drinking water regulations, we request the restora-

tion of annual grant funding for the Public Water Systems Supervision Program to \$866,666," President Nygren told the committee. "The last time the program was fully funded was in 2014."



In reply to a question from Committee Chairman Thomas Carper, D-Delaware, about whether current funding is sufficient or not, President Nygren said the needs on Navajo are unlike those in other American communities.

"I was talking with our EPA team," President Nygren said. "They haven't gone out to evaluate some of the groundwater systems like windmills that a lot of our people continue to use."

He said like other Navajos with no other water source, he grew up drinking well water throughout his youth.



U.S. Sen. Thomas Carper, chairman of the Senate Committee for Environment & Public Works, is credited with guiding \$50 billion to communities to bring clean and pure water to residents.

"I wonder if the well water that I drank for 19 years was ever tested," he said. "A lot of communities still use well water, spring water. Some of the spring waters on Navajo had traces of uranium, but sometimes communities just need to drink water to satisfy their thirst. If we were fully funded above and beyond what we are requesting at the moment, it would really help us."

He said 30% of the Navajo population still doesn't have access to clean, reliable drinking water, because most have to haul the water miles and miles at a time.

Dr. Radhika Fox, an environmental engineer and former EPA assistant administrator for water, said since the Safe Drinking Water Act became law, water quality has greatly improved despite the emergence of forever chemicals.

"We have gone from human waste in our drinking water, we've gone from rivers on fire because there was so much pollution, to really incredible progress for the American people," she said.

Under Sen. Carper, who has chaired the committee since 2017 and retires from the Senate at the end of the year, \$50 billion in water infrastructure funding has set the stage for the next 50 years of progress, she said.

"From the moment we wake up in the morning and brew a cup of coffee, to the moment before bed when we brush our teeth, we need safe drinking water, Dr. Fox said. "We rely on water from our taps for cooking, washing and bathing. Each day, Americans drink more than one billion glasses of tap water. Water truly is life."

The Navajo Nation's efforts to deliver pure water to residents began with the establishment of the water systems program in 1991 with a grant from the federal EPA, President Nygren said.

The Navajo Nation Safe Drinking Water Act was formally adopted in 1995.

"Despite the progress made to secure safe drinking water, significant challenges persist," he said. "The most pressing issue is the lack of basic water infrastructure in many Navajo communities."

The Nation needs to build pipelines and water systems across its rugged and remote terrain, he told the committee.

President Nygren added that emerging water contaminants called "forever chemicals" – Perfluoroalkyl and Polyfluoroalkyl substances – require improved forms of monitoring, regulation and treatment. These, in turn, require more investment in equipment, technology, and expertise.

PFAS are a group of synthetic chemicals that have been used in products and industrial processes since the 1950s. They're found in countless products like clothing, carpets, furniture fabrics, adhesives, food packaging, non-stick cookware, plastics and fire-fighting foams. They repel water, grease and oil.

PFAS are extremely persistent in the environment because they don't break down. They leak into soil, water, air and bioaccumulate in fish, wildlife and humans.

People become exposed to PFAS by consuming contaminated food, water and using products made with PFAS, or by breathing air containing them. It is now known PFAS can lead to health problems

like liver damage, thyroid disease, obesity, fertility issues and cancer.

The Safe Drinking Water Act came about in the early 1970s when concerns were raised about the purity of drinking water. Although millions of people in the U.S. take for granted that their faucet water is clean and pure, few but professionals consider how water gets from its initial source, through the treatment process and then to home faucets.

Almost monthly from 1961 to 1970, a community somewhere in the U.S. experienced an outbreak of a waterborne disease. In that period, it sickened 46,000 people, and 20 people died.

In 1970, the U.S. Public Health Service reported 41% of water systems didn't meet minimal safety standards. More than 25 million people were receiving substandard public utility water. Some eight million people got water that was potentially dangerous to drink.

On Dec. 16, 1974, President Gerald Ford signed the Safe Drinking Water Act after being on the verge of being killed in the House of Representatives.

Today, the law focuses on all water actually or potentially designed for drinking use, whether from above ground or underground sources. Amendments to SDWA in 1996 required the EPA to consider a detailed risk and cost assessment, and best available peer-reviewed science, when developing these standards.

President Nygren told the committee that the Navajo Nation laid a strong foundation to regulate and monitor water systems across the reservation. He said the 1995 Navajo Nation Safe Drinking Water Act aligned with federal regulations to ensure all drinking water systems on Navajo met tough safety and compliance standards.

Through collaborative partnerships with the IHS and EPA, the Navajo public water systems program significantly reduced contamination levels in several Navajo communities like Aneth, Montezuma Creek and Greasewood Springs, among others, he said.

Doing that required construction of water treatment plants and the extension of pipelines to bring clean water to areas that previously relied on less reliable sources, he said.



Dr. Radhika Fox, an environmental engineer and former EPA assistant administrator for water.

"These initiatives demonstrate the PWSSP's commitment to innovation and collaboration in safeguarding water quality and public health," the President said.

Funding through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation, and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law have been instrumental to extend pipelines and upgrade infrastructure.

"As the demands on our water systems continue to grow, additional action and resources are urgently needed," President Nygren said.

Funding is needed for enforcement, inspections, operator training and overall program sustainability, he said.

"I urge Congress to continue to support tribal primacy programs like the Navajo Public Water Systems Program, and increase funding for critical infrastructure projects," President Nygren said.

"Together, we can honor the safe drinking water act's promise and ensure safe drinking water for all the Navajo people and future generations."