



25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

## 25TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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### **25th Navajo Nation Council Delegates advocate for protection of sacred ceremonies and medicines**



**25th Navajo Nation Council Delegates participated in an American Indian Religious Freedom Summit panel about protecting sacred ceremonies and medicines.**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** – On Tuesday, Nov. 19, members of the 25th Navajo Nation Council gathered to support tribal responsibility in protecting sacred ceremonies and medicines during a panel at the American Indian Religious Freedom Summit.

The summit, organized by the Native American Church of North America and the National Congress of American Indians, brought together tribal leaders including Council Delegates Germaine Simonson, Cherilyn Yazzie, Shawna Ann Claw, Navajo Nation Vice President Richelle Montoya, and Governor Reggie Wassana of the Cheyenne Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. The panel was moderated by Navajo attorney Justin Jones.

The panelists reflected on Public Law 103-344, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994, which safeguards the traditional ceremonial use of peyote as a religious sacrament. Mescaline, a naturally occurring intoxicant found in peyote, is central to these ceremonies.

Council Delegate Simonson, vice chair of the 25th Navajo Nation Council's Health, Education, and Human Services Committee, emphasized the urgent need for tribal leadership to unite in protecting the ceremonial use of peyote.

"In 1994, when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments were passed, tribal nations had allies in all three branches of the federal government. Today, we no longer have that," Delegate Simonson said. "We must unite with other Indian tribes, build allies, and engage with everyone. As a leader here today, I urge us to move forward with one voice. That is the only way."

Council Delegate Yazzie, vice chair of the Law and Order Committee, shared her personal connection to Native American Church traditions, recalling how her father participated in the Church and taught her about ceremonial practices.

"He encouraged me to learn to sew and to put a tipi together. I took it upon myself to do this," Delegate Yazzie said. "I feel that as our tribal governments advocate to protect this freedom, we need to put the seams together to make it strong like a tipi. It's policy and legislation. We have to do this together."

Council Delegate Claw voiced a call to action against the decriminalization of mescaline for non-ceremonial purposes, which could undermine protections in the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

Many scientists have explored the potential therapeutic uses of psychedelics, including peyote, which has raised concerns among Native Americans. They fear that ceremonies involving the plant could become subject to patents by pharmaceutical companies.

"We must think strategically and take a bold stand against the federal government's discussions on the decriminalization of peyote," Delegate Claw said. "Our stance must be rooted in our spirit and the historical context of religious freedom, which played a key role in the foundation of the United States. As tribal nations, we have a sacred duty to protect our religious freedoms and sovereignty, ensuring they are respected and upheld for future generations."

Vice President Montoya expressed gratitude to the panel and spoke out against the growing encroachment of federal policies on Native religious freedoms.

"When outside forces attempt to dictate our way of life, they undermine the teachings passed down to us," Vice President Montoya said. "They erode our traditions and disrupt the foundation of who we are. Our efforts are focused on safeguarding this way of life—the sacred fireplace and the elements of the world."

The panel was attended by U.S. Senator Markwayne Mullin, who expressed strong support for the right to freedom of religion. Senator Mullin said, "Religion is integral to all our lives. It's part of our past, our heritage, and our identity. In my family, it's the same. We all have the fundamental right to practice our religions freely."

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