



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Budget and Finance Committee approves Cooperative Agreement for federal Land Buy Back Program

Legislation to be considered by Naabik'iyáti' Committee for final approval

WINDOW ROCK – The Budget and Finance Committee on Tuesday approved Legislation No. 0106-15, which seeks the Navajo Nation's approval to enter into a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of the Interior.

If approved by the Naabik'iyáti' Committee, the agreement would allow the Navajo Nation to implement the land consolidation component of the Cobell Settlement which resulted from a class action lawsuit led by the late Elouise Cobell, over claims that the government mishandled and incorrectly accounted for the income from Indian Trust assets, specifically Individual Indian Money accounts.

The 2012 settlement provided \$1.9 billion for tribes to consolidate fractional land interests — \$1.5 billion to purchase fractional land interests, \$285 million for implementation and administrative costs, and \$60 million for scholarships.

On March 17, the Land Buy-Back Program issued a letter to President Ben Shelly formally offering the cooperative agreement which would provide funding to support land consolidation activities.

If approved, individual allottees will be provided the opportunity to voluntarily sell their land, which would then be placed in trust for the Navajo Nation. The proposed agreement would expire on April 30, 2016.

The bill was first considered and approved by the Resources and Development Committee on Tuesday, where legislation co-sponsor Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) expressed concern over the one-year timeframe of the proposed agreement.

“We want to talk with the Department of the Interior about the possibility of modifying the timeframe of the agreement down the road,” stated Delegate Tsosie, pointing out that it may require a longer period of time for the Navajo Nation to complete the process in a one-year timeframe compared to other smaller tribes who have smaller populations and land base.

According to a report provided by the Land Buy Back Program, the Navajo Nation has nearly 34,000 individual landowners who reside in 49 states and two foreign countries. 3,383 of the landowners' whereabouts are unknown.

Individuals who choose to sell their land would receive fair market value for the land. Once an offer is made, landowners will have 45 days to consider the offer. The total estimated cost to purchase all fractional land interests for the Navajo Nation exceeds \$102 million.

If the cooperative agreement is approved, the program would be headquartered in the community of Crownpoint, with three satellite offices in Gallup, Farmington, and Winslow.

The legislation is expected to be considered by the Naabik'iyátí' Committee for final approval on Thursday.

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