



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Navajo Nation finalizes Cooperative Agreement for federal Land Buy Back Program

WINDOW ROCK—Following approval by the Naabik’iyáti’ Committee last Thursday, President Ben Shelly on Tuesday signed a resolution finalizing a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of the Interior to initiate a federal Land Buy Back Program.

The agreement allows 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.

Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake), who sponsored the bill, previously said that the program will be beneficial for development projects in the Eastern Navajo Agency.

Delegate Tsosie highlighted several land issues that have stalled development projects including, the establishment of a school in the community of Pueblo Pintado due to conflicts over land boundaries in “checkerboard” areas.

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

Through the Land Buy Back Program individual allottees will be provided the opportunity to voluntarily sell their land, which would then be placed in trust for the Navajo Nation. The agreement will expire on April 30, 2016.

“We are excited that the Navajo Nation has taken a strong interest in the program,” said Bureau of Indian Affairs Navajo Regional Director Sharon Pinto.

Executive director of the Eastern Navajo Land Commission Larry Rodgers also attended the signing ceremony and emphasized the need for public outreach to educate Navajo allottees about the program.

"We need to educate the landowners to be well-informed about the options they have as to whether they want to sell or not," stated Rodgers. "In the very end it's up to [the allottees]"

According to federal officials, 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.

The program will be headquartered in the community of Crownpoint, with three satellite offices in Gallup, Farmington, and Winslow. A total of 14 staff members including a program manager, administrative assistant, public relations officer, seven community involvement specialists, and four office specialists will be hired to implement the Land Buy Back Program.

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