



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 19, 2015

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Eastern Navajo Land Commission discusses Land Buy-Back Program

ALBUQUERQUE N.M. – Members of the Eastern Navajo Land Commission met with officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior on Thursday, to discuss the ongoing implementation of the federal Land Buy-Back Program on the Navajo Nation.

The Navajo Nation signed a cooperative agreement with the federal government in April, to allow for the implementation of the land consolidation component of the Cobell Settlement — a class action lawsuit over claims that the government mismanaged 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.

Under the terms of the cooperative agreement that is set to expire on April 30, 2016, individual Navajo allottees will have the opportunity to voluntarily sell their allotment land, which would then be placed in trust for the Navajo Nation.

ENLC chair Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) emphasized the need for the program to provide clear and defined details to its employees and elected officials in order to accurately and thoroughly inform the public.

Several officials have expressed the need to consolidate fractionated lands in order to proceed with development on the lands, particularly in checkerboard areas. Delegate Tsosie previously provided a specific example in which the establishment of a school in the community of Pueblo Pintado was stopped due to conflicts over land boundaries in a checkerboard area.

ENLC director Larry Rodgers provided an overview of the estimated timeline for the program, which includes a six-month outreach effort to inform the public — specifically the estimated 34,000 Navajo allottees across the U.S. — of the details of the program.

Outreach efforts are set to begin in July with several events tentatively scheduled to take place in the communities of Crownpoint, Winslow, and Farmington. Other efforts may also occur during upcoming Navajo fairs.

Rodgers also reported that his office has begun hiring for 14 program positions and recently hired a program manager, Betty Begay, to oversee the Land Buy-Back Program. He also pointed out that

the hiring process has delayed the program's efforts to move forward due to the Nation's complicated personnel hiring process. The program will be headquartered in the community of Crownpoint, with three satellite offices in Gallup, Farmington, and Leupp.

The program has also begun the challenging process of assessing allotment lands in order to determine the value of the land. A final report is anticipated by late November. Upon the completion of land appraisals, land allottees will have 45 days to consider an offer. Those who choose to sell their allotment(s) would receive fair market value for the land.

Land Buy-Back Program manager John H. McClanahan and Senior Advisor on Tribal Relations Santee Lewis have continually emphasized that the program is completely voluntary.

ENLC members agree that the most important aspect of the program will be public outreach and ensuring that allottees are provided thorough and accurate information to allow each person to make an educated decision.

The Eastern Navajo Land Commission was established for several purposes including to assist in the implementation of Council's enacted land acquisition and consolidation activities in the Eastern Navajo Agency. The Commission's voting members are comprised of Council Delegates Leonard Tsoie (chair), Seth Damon (Vice Chair), Norman M. Begay, Jonathan Perry, Edmund Yazzie, and former delegate Danny Simpson.

For more information about the program, please visit <http://www.doi.gov//buybackprogram>.

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