



## 23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Naabik'iyátí' Committee receives report regarding Land Buy-Back Program**

*Legislation introduced seeking approval of Cooperative Agreement*

**WINDOW ROCK**— The Naabik'iyátí' Committee received a report from federal officials with the Land Buy-Back Program, regarding a potential cooperative agreement between the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Navajo Nation.

Land Buy-Back Program manager John H. McClanahan and Senior Advisor on Tribal Relations Santee Lewis, presented to Naabik'iyátí' Committee members on Thursday.

The Land Buy-Back Program was created 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.

Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) said he supports the cooperative agreement, adding that it would help to ease land issues that often hinder development projects.

“In the Eastern Navajo Agency, we have over 4,000 allotments and when it comes to a project or any type of development we are told to contact all of the allottees,” said Delegate Tsosie.

Lewis said the cooperative agreement is the product of meetings and discussions dating back to June 2013 involving Navajo Nation officials, including the Eastern Navajo Land Commission.

Priorities of the program include promoting landowner awareness and education to facilitate landowner decision-making, expending trust land consolidation fund by purchasing interest from landowners to reduce fractionation and expand tribal ownership, and improving government-to-government relationships with tribes, according to Lewis.

The report also states that 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.

Lewis emphasized that the first phase of the program will be to provide outreach to the public to inform landowners of the program, to answer questions, and to identify willing land sellers.

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.

On Friday, Legislation No. 0106-15 was introduced, which seeks the approval of the cooperative agreement. To view the legislation and the report provided by the Land Buy-Back Program, please visit [navajonationcouncil.org](http://navajonationcouncil.org).

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