



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Council moves forward with efforts to complete the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project

FARMINGTON N.M. – The 23rd Navajo Nation Council continued its efforts on Friday to coordinate with federal officials to push for the completion of the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project for the benefit of Navajo Agricultural Products Industry and its hundreds of Navajo employees.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates, Resource and Development Committee chair Alton Joe Shepherd, and members of the RDC have met with officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and NAPI on several occasions to discuss the federal government's obligation to provide funding to complete the final three 10,000-acre blocks of the NIIP, in accordance with Public Law 87-483, which was passed by Congress in 1962.

At Friday's meeting, Speaker Bates emphasized that NAPI needs to know what level of funding to expect from the federal government in the coming years in order to operate and plan accordingly.

"We need to know what the options are moving forward because it impacts how NAPI operates currently and how it will plan for future development down the road," Speaker Bates told federal officials including executive director of the BIA Michael Black, BIA Navajo Region director Sharon Pinto, and officials from the federal Bureau of Reclamation.

Speaker Bates also said that the stakes are high when it comes to water usage at the NIIP, pointing out that the Nation has secured water rights through the San Juan River water settlement to be used for the NIIP. However, NAPI is not able to use all of the water due to the lack of completion of Blocks 9, 10, and 11 – each consisting of 10,000 acres of land.

"In the event that the remaining blocks are not complete, then we need to be proactive in determining how to use that water," added Speaker Bates.

Council members and NAPI interim CEO Lionel Haskie, have continuously told federal officials that reduced annual funding from the federal government is resulting in the gradual deterioration of existing infrastructure by creating a large deferred maintenance backlog. Annual federal funding has decreased from \$25 million, to \$12.5 million, to a current low of \$3.3 million.

Haskie pointed out that NAPI has contributed millions of dollars of its own funds to pay for the cost of operations and maintenance of its facilities and requested that the federal government reimburse NAPI for those costs.

Despite Congress' approval over five decades ago, NIIP construction remains only 75-percent complete and it is estimated that may cost over \$700 million to complete the project.

Several NAPI employees also made a presentation to the federal officials on the overall benefits that NAPI provides to local communities and the Navajo Nation by way of employing 350 – 450 people annually, through donations of their products to chapters and in emergency situations such as the Gold King Mine spill, and through its scholarship and internship program.

“The intention of the 1962 law was to improve the quality of life for Navajo people and to promote economic development and we've achieved that and now we look to grow more and develop more,” stated Haskie.

BIA director Michael Black acknowledged that the federal government has an obligation to the Navajo Nation and the NIIP. He recommended that a NIIP policy team and technical team be formed to develop options and to develop a proposal that could be presented to federal agencies and members of Congress to consider.

Black also said the BIA would support and fund a study through California Polytechnic State University, an entity that the BIA partners with, to conduct a study of NAPI's current operations to identify areas of improvement that could lead to a more efficient and effective operation.

At the conclusion of Friday's meeting, all of the officials agreed to forming the policy and technical teams and to work together in the coming weeks to develop options and a proposal. The officials will meet in April to review and discuss how to move forward on a path to completing the NIIP.

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