



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Health, Education, and Human Services Committee receives report regarding concerns with hydraulic fracturing in the Eastern Navajo Agency

NAGEEZI, N.M. – Last week, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee received a report from the “Caretakers Land, Elders, and Children’s Association,” an organization from the Eastern Navajo Agency, who had concerns regarding hydraulic fracturing and the lack of information provided to Navajo land owners who signed leases to allow oil and gas companies to extract natural resources from their lands.

According to the report, the organization visited Navajo land owners who claimed that the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs failed to protect them because they are receiving payments below the fair market price, were not educated on the hydraulic fracturing process, were not provided pictures or diagrams of how the well pads worked, and were not informed that the extraction method utilized large amounts of water.

Hydraulic fracturing, also known as “fracking,” is the injection of fluid into shale beds at high pressure in order to free up petroleum resources such as oil and gas. It creates fissures in the rock deep beneath the earth’s surface, which allows oil and gas to flow into a well that will collect the petroleum resources.

HEHSC chair Council Delegate Jonathan Hale (Oak Springs, St. Michaels) informed organization members that he had sponsored legislation to oppose hydraulic fracturing, however, Council members recommended to have studies completed to evaluate the natural resource extracting method to understand the process and how it may affect Navajo land.

“The Navajo Nation Oil and Gas said they were going to do some studies. If you are going to do studies, hopefully it’s from here [on the Navajo Nation]. Not from the east coast or somewhere else. We need our own Navajo Nation study, and we also need to request resources from the committees to fund the studies,” said Delegate Hale.

He added that the communities should have been consulted, and encouraged the organization to provide any documentation that may support the notion that hydraulic fracturing is detrimental to Navajo land, the people, culture, and landscape.

Etta Arviso, co-founder of the association, said the studies should include the impact of the energy companies’ effect on cultural sites, such as an environmental impact study. She added that

the Navajo Nation should allow local community members to provide testimony and first-hand knowledge of how hydraulic fracturing has affected their land, income, health care plans, and water use.

EHSC vice chair Council Delegate Norman M. Begay (Alamo, Ramah, Tóhajiilee) stated that a comprehensive plan should be developed to survey the land boundaries to see if any laws may have been violated by the energy companies, such as the desecration of sacred sites and burial grounds.

“The bottom line is that they may have broke the rules. The sites have been identified. We have the Sacred Sites Subcommittee and they can help with this issue,” said Delegate Begay. “The [Eastern Navajo Land Commission] must be involved, [as well as Navajo] law enforcement, the BIA, and other entities. They all need to have input to resolve this issue, because this has gone on for too long.”

In agreement, EHSC member Council Delegate Nelson S. BeGaye (Lukachukai, Rock Point, Round Rock, Tsaile/Wheatfields, Tsé Ch’ izhí) recommended that the Sacred Sites Subcommittee begin monitoring the issue and to provide guidance to the association. He stated that the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President and the Navajo Nation Council need to begin addressing the concerns because energy companies could be violating the civil rights of Navajo citizens.

EHSC members voted 4-0 to accept the report.

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