



## 23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Council members applaud U.S. District Court ruling upholding Navajo voting rights in San Juan County, Utah**

**WINDOW ROCK** – Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland) applauded Thursday’s ruling issued by the Utah Federal District Court in the case of the Navajo Nation vs. San Juan County, Utah and said the ruling upholds the voting rights of thousands of Navajo citizens in San Juan County, Utah.

The court order requires the election boundaries within the county to be redrawn to comply with the U.S. Constitution and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It also requires elections for the county commission and school board to be held in November 2018, and orders the modified boundaries to be applied in the elections.

“Today’s ruling is a significant step in the right direction for Navajo people who reside in San Juan County, Utah and for the county as a whole,” stated Speaker Bates. “ I am grateful to the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission and many others who helped fight for the rights of our people.”

In 2011, the Navajo Nation Council recognized the need for redistricting in San Juan County due to the unconstitutional district boundaries that led to a lack of representation of Navajo people in the county commission and school boards, and tasked the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission to address the matter. In 2012, the Navajo Nation filed a lawsuit against the county.

The court appointed Special Master Dr. Bernard Grofman to recommend redistricting maps for the San Juan County Utah Commission and for the San Juan County School Board, which was submitted to the court for review in late November.

Thursday’s court ruling issued by U.S. District Court Judge Robert J. Shelby, states, “the court concludes Dr. Grofman’s recommended remedial districts comply with the Constitution, the Voting Rights Act, and traditional redistricting principles to the extent possible.”

Council Delegate Davis Filfred (Mexican Water, Aneth, Tecnospos, Tóíkan, Red Mesa), who represents several Navajo communities within San Juan County, said the redistricting requirements respect and protects the voting rights of Navajo people.

“For many years, our Navajo people were not adequately represented on the county commission and the school board due to the unfair voting boundaries that were intentionally imposed to diminish our votes and our voices. With today’s ruling we are optimistic that our communities will be treated fairly in the upcoming elections,” added Delegate Filfred.

Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission executive director Leonard Gorman, stated that the process of initiating and litigating the redistricting in San Juan County has been very lengthy in comparison to similar redistricting that has occurred in other states.

The Navajo Nation successfully addressed redistricting in the states of New Mexico and Arizona in 2011, according to Gorman. However, in the state of Utah the process of redistricting has been met with great resistance and concerted efforts to delay the court proceedings.

“It has been a long difficult process, especially when it has now taken six years to litigate the redistricting case. However, it is important to realize, respect and protect the voting rights of Native Americans in all counties on the Navajo Nation,” stated Gorman. “The county refused to redistrict in 2011, although the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission offered to assist. The county believed that it's 1984 consent decree with the United States Department of Justice was perpetual and not subject to change.”

He further noted that the Navajo Nation will be going through the redistricting process again in 2021 for all congressional, legislative, county, school board election districts.

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