



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Eastern Navajo Land Commission recognizes tribal and federal officials to mark the successful end to the Navajo Land Buy-Back Program



PHOTO: Eastern Navajo Land Commission members, Speaker LoRenzo Bates, Vice President Jonathan Nez, and federal officials at the closing ceremony for the Navajo Land Buy-Back Program at the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona on Jan. 5, 2017.

WINDOW ROCK – The Eastern Navajo Land Commission gathered with federal and tribal leaders on Thursday as they hosted a closing ceremony to acknowledge and recognize the significant accomplishments and successes of the federal Land Buy-Back Program for the Navajo Nation.

In April 2015, Navajo Nation Council members approved a cooperative agreement with the federal government 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 — \$1.5 billion to purchase fractional land interests, \$285 million for implementation and administrative costs, and \$60 million for scholarships.

In his opening remarks, ENLC chair Council Delegate Leonard Tsosie (Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Counselor, Littlewater, Ojo Encino, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake) praised the Navajo Land Buy Back Program staff, the Eastern Navajo Land Commission staff, and federal officials for working collaboratively together to promote the program and to engage with Navajo allotments owners that were willing to consider and voluntarily sell their allotment interests.

According to the U.S. Department of the Interior, more than 25,000 landowners with fractionated land interests received offers from the Buy-Back Program. In total, more than \$108 million was paid to landowners who chose to accept their purchase offers – approximately \$6 million more than was anticipated. Interests were purchased in more than 2,800 tracts, consolidating more than 155,500 equivalent acres for the Navajo Nation.

Deputy Secretary of the Interior Michael L. Connor, Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations program manager John McClanahan, Bureau of Indian Affairs Navajo Regional Director Sharon Pinto, and Margaret Williams with the Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians were also in attendance at the closing ceremony.

“The significant accomplishments we are announcing today come as a direct result of the close nation-to-nation cooperation we have had with sovereign tribal nations, such as the Navajo Nation,” said Deputy Secretary Connor. “We’re already seeing the difference this program is making. In addition to the significant resources flowing into Indian Country, returning fractionated lands to tribes in trust has enormous potential to improve tribal community resources by increasing home site locations, improving transportation routes, spurring tribal economic development, and preserving traditional cultural or ceremonial sites.”

Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse’Daa’Kaan, Upper Fruitland) joined Delegate Tsosie in presenting appreciation plaques to officials including Charles Damon, II, who previously served four terms on the Navajo Nation Council and is also the former chair of the ENLC. The ENLC members honored him for his very instrumental role in initiating the Buy-Back Program to benefit the Navajo Nation.

“Mr. Damon opened the door for the Navajo Nation and this program has proven to benefit many of our Navajo people and communities,” stated Delegate Tsosie, who also commended former Council Delegate Danny Simpson, ENLC Office director Larry Rodgers, and his staff for overseeing the implementation of the program and providing tremendous support throughout its duration.

Other current ENLC members include Council Delegates Seth Damon, Jonathan Perry, Norman M. Begay, Edmund Yazzie, and former Council Delegate Danny Simpson.

“They saw this program as a means to help the Navajo Nation with its land issues to promote development and economic opportunities for our people and communities. On behalf of the 23rd Navajo Nation Council, I am very thankful and very proud of all of you for your remarkable work and accomplishments,” concluded Speaker Bates.

For more information on the progress of the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations, please visit: https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/2016_buy-back_program_final_0.pdf.

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