



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Navajo Nation looks to continue the success of the federal Land Buy-Back Program

TSE BONITO, N.M. – Members of the 23rd Navajo Nation Council, President Russell Begaye, and the Eastern Navajo Land Commission office met with officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Land Buy-Back Program, Appraisal and Valuation Services Office, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians on Thursday, to discuss the implementation of the second round of the federal Land Buy-Back Program for the Navajo Nation.

In 2012 the Cobell Settlement, which stemmed from a class action lawsuit over claims that the federal government mismanaged and incorrectly accounted for the income from Indian Trust assets – specifically Individual Indian Money accounts. Out of the total settlement award of \$1.9 billion, \$1.5 billion was allocated to purchase fractional land interests, \$285 million for implementation and administrative costs, and \$60 million for scholarships for Native Americans.

The 23rd Navajo Nation Council approved legislation in April 2014 that authorized former President Ben Shelly to sign a cooperative agreement with the federal government to allow the Eastern Navajo Land Commission to hire staff, educate Navajo landowners, and coordinate sale offers under the implementation of the program on the Navajo Nation.

In January 2017, the 23rd Navajo Nation Council hosted a closing ceremony to mark the successful end to the first round of the program for the Navajo Nation, in which more than \$108 million was



PHOTO: (left to right) BIA Navajo Region Director Sharon Pinto, Federal Land Buy-Back Program Manager John McClanahan, President Russell Begaye, Speaker LoRenzo Bates, Council Delegate Norman M. Begay, Council Delegate Seth Damon, and Office of the Special Trustee official Lavern Sam, during the Federal Land Buy-Back Program meeting at the Navajo Nation Division of Transportation on June 21, 2018.

paid to Navajo landowners and an equivalent of more than 155,000 acres of land was restored into trust for the Navajo Nation.

During Thursday's meeting, Council Delegate Seth Damon (Báaháálí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Lichíí', Rock Springs, Tsayatoh) and Eastern Navajo Land Commission office director Larry Rodgers, emphasized the need for sufficient resources and funding to effectively implement the second round of the program, due to the allotment landownership population, land size, and the geographic distribution of allotment lands throughout the Navajo Nation.

"The Navajo Nation is different than other tribes, and in order to make this second round a success we need to make sure that the Navajo Land Buy-Back Program operation has adequate resources to reach as many allotment owners as possible and return as much land to the Navajo Nation as possible," stated Delegate Damon.

The Eastern Navajo Land Commission and its office will be tasked once again with working collaboratively with federal Land Buy-Back Program officials on outreach efforts, and the overall administration of the program. Eastern Navajo Land Commission members include Council Delegates Leonard Tsosie, Seth Damon, Jonathan Perry, Norman M. Begay, Edmund Yazzie, and former delegate Danny Simpson.

Prior to the start of the second round of the program, the Naabik'iyáti' Committee of the Navajo Nation Council will have to consider and approve a new cooperative agreement. Once finalized, outreach efforts will begin early next year followed by appraisals of fractionated allotment lands. The program anticipates mailing offers to landowners by summer 2019.

As of Thursday, federal officials said they will allow allotment owners up to 60 days to consider whether or not to accept offers from the federal Land Buy-Back Program. Federal officials emphasize that the program participation on part of the landowners is completely voluntary.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland) was also in attendance at the meeting, and offered his continued support for the Eastern Navajo Land Commission and thanked both federal and tribal officials for working cooperatively to restore trust land for the Navajo Nation.

In preparation for the second round of the Land Buy-Back Program, landowners are encouraged to contact their local Office of the Special Trustee or to call the Trust Beneficiary Call Center at 1-888-678-6836, in order to ensure their contact information is up-to-date and that the Office of the Special Trustee has their correct information, such as their correct date of birth and spelling of their name. For more information on the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations, please visit <https://www.doi.gov/buybackprogram>.

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