



Resources and Development Committee continues discussion of drought and feral horse responses on Navajo Nation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 10, 2020

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.— The Resources Development Committee (RDC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council received updates on current Navajo Nation drought conditions and continued addressing the Navajo Nation's feral horse population during the committee's regular meeting Jul. 8.

Najam Tariq, director of the Technical, Construction, and Operations Branch (TCOB) of the Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources (DWR), presented challenges that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic created in the department's ongoing response to the current 12-plus-year drought in the southwest United States.

The department has struggled to meet the needs of Navajo communities for well and windmill service with only half of its essential staff currently reporting to work during the closure of Navajo Nation government offices.

Much of DWR's \$6.9 million budget has gone towards repairs and parts for windmills. Tariq also indicated that the 3-gallon-per-minute production from windmills often falls far below the demand for the community's livestock needs.

With only 900 windmills covering the 24,000 square miles of the Navajo Nation, Dr. Rudy Shebala, executive director of the Navajo Nation Division of Natural Resources stated that providing more windmills would help meet livestock and community water needs throughout the nation.

DWR has also been pushing water transportation and delivery initiatives aimed at improving the Navajo Nation's livestock economy. The department recently completed a water pipeline for livestock use that extends nine miles between Leupp and Birdsprings.

Leo Watchman, Jr., director of the Navajo Nation Department of Agriculture, indicated the department is in the process of outlining a \$9 million plan to improve water infrastructure and regulate feral horse populations with Dr. Shebala.

The plan would draw from two allocations of \$17 million and \$19 million made by the 23rd Navajo Nation Council to meet drought needs.

Watchman added that humane horse roundups would resume despite previous criticism from animal rights activists because drought conditions continue to intensify across the Navajo Nation. At least 75 Local Navajo Nation chapter government resolutions have been approved requesting the Navajo Nation continue conducting roundups. Some resolutions report over 1,000 feral horses have been counted in their communities.

In the community of Steamboat, Watchman reported that he was called to address a situation earlier Wednesday morning where feral horses were falling into the mud at a waterhole. A similar event took was reported in May 2018 in Gray Mountain that resulted in the death of nearly 200 feral horses that were too weak to escape being stuck in mud at a stock pond.

Council Delegate Herman Daniels, Jr. (Tсах Bii Kin, Navajo Mountain, Shonto, Oljato) responded to the reports with concern for the lack of action since the RDC last discussed the issue three weeks ago. He indicated that he does not want this conversation to keep going for another year with minimal action.

Council Delegate Mark Freeland, Jr. (Becenti, Lake Valley, Nahodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint) also stressed the importance of taking care of Navajo horses living in harsh conditions. He recalled seeing feral horses digging for water near Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

“I am concerned with how many times we have to wait for final approval to spend this money from [Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez’s] office,” said Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. (Tachee/Blue Gap, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tselani/Cottonwood, Low Mountain). “Can’t we approve this faster in an emergency? The people are the ones who are affected by all of these decisions and delays.”

Watchman indicated that horse roundups are a form of seizure that requires local chapter government approval and the involvement of other entities, like the RDC, in order to be properly conducted.

Sometimes, chapter officials call off feral horse roundups due to criticism from animal rights activists. That was the case in Cottonwood this past week.

Council Delegate Wilson Stewart, Jr. (Crystal, Fort Defiance, Red Lake, Sawmill) added that holding livestock owners accountable for the care of their animals is important. He asked Watchman to provide tallies of livestock per district, livestock mismanagement numbers and details on overgrazed areas.

Dr. Shebala also wants to use funds to improve incentives to local grazing officials and community members to improve regulation and the surrendering of livestock when owners are unable to take care of them, said Watchman.

Watchman agreed that the plan needs to be expedited and gave assurance to the RDC that a written report would be provided to the Council by Wednesday night.

The RDC approved both drought reports with a vote of 5 in favor and 0 opposed.

“[The Resources and Development Committee] is here to help in any way we can,” said Delegate Freeland. “Please let us know what legislations will help further [programs under the DNR] so we can successfully improve the quality of life for these horses.”

The Resources and Development Committee (RDC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council is comprised of Chairman Rickie Nez (T’iistoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tse’ Daa’ Kaan, Newcomb, San Juan), Vice Chairperson Thomas Walker, Jr. (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Birdsprings, Leupp, Tolani Lake), and Council Delegates Kee Allen Begay, Jr., Herman M. Daniels, Mark Freeland and Wilson Stewart, Jr. are members.

###

MEDIA CONTACTS: nnlb.communications@gmail.com, (928) 287-2085
Byron C. Shorty, INT Communications Director
Timothy Benally, Public Information Officer
Isabella S. Robbins, Staff Writer