



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

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Speaker Damon, RDC call for greater inclusion of Navajo communities in federal Chaco effort



PHOTO: In a meeting with Sen. Heinrich Jan. 8, Speaker Seth Damon and Resources and Development Committee Chair Rickie Nez, Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr., and Delegate Mark Freeland discussed S.1079. Speaker Damon and RDC made the policy trip to Washington to meet with Congressional members and federal entities to coordinate on the Navajo Nation's federal priorities for 2020.

WASHINGTON – Jan. 12, 2020 – Speaker Damon, Resources and Development Committee Chair Rickie Nez, Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr., and Delegate Mark Freeland each called on members of Congress and federal agency administrators Jan. 7-9 to ensure local Navajo voices are heard and considered before further federal action is taken on the Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

“As representatives of the Diné people, our goal is to ensure that the allottees and the communities immediately surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park are heard before any decisions by Congress are made,” said Speaker Damon.

Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), who is on the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, is cosponsoring Senate Bill 1079. The bill, also called the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act of 2019, is being sponsored by Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.). The bill proposes an

exclusion zone on development of federal minerals in an area of approximately 10 miles surrounding the historical park.

Chaco Culture National Historical Park is surrounded by the Navajo communities of White Rock, Nageezi, Counselor, Pueblo Pintado, White Horse Lake, and others in New Mexico.

“The issue is that we have Navajo families and allottees, especially in Nageezi, that live inside the proposed buffer that want the opportunity to speak directly before members of Congress before a final vote takes place,” said Delegate Freeland during a meeting with Sen. John Barrasso’s (R-WY) staff Jan. 7. Delegate Freeland reiterated this statement in separate meetings with Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT), Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT), Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), Rep. Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.), and Rep. Tom O’Halloran (D-AZ) held last week.



PHOTOS: Speaker Damon, RDC members Hon. Kee Allen Begay, Jr., and Hon. Mark Freeland met with Rep. Tom O'Halleran and others in Washington Jan. 7-9 to request field hearings and to coordinate with Congress and the Administration on the Navajo Nation's federal priorities going into 2020.

In addition to Navajo Nation trust lands, the exclusion zone would impact Navajo allottees and their families who derive income from the mineral rights they were given by the federal government, explained RDC Chair Rickie Nez.

Sen. Heinrich's staff explained to Navajo Nation legislative staff assistants on Wed. that the bill began with input submitted during a public comment period on the Bureau of Land Management's oil and gas lease assessments in the Greater Chaco area.

Speaker Damon and RDC members shared with Sen. Heinrich that the Navajo Nation has no official position regarding development outside of the nearly 34,000 acre historical park. The Navajo Nation Code, explained Delegate Begay, reserves coordination on federal legislation to the Council and standing committees.

They explained that their purpose in meeting with the Congressional members was to request more field hearings in the eastern Navajo region, particularly Nageezi, so that local communities and allottees may speak on the record.

"There are 23 different land statuses we have to deal with in Eastern Navajo," explained Delegate Freeland. Navajo constituents have approached him and made requests to push for a more

inclusive engagement process, said Delegate Freeland.

"The complexity of this issue is made clear by the deep cultural ties that the Navajo Nation maintains to the area and the need for Navajo allotted land owners to be directly considered by Congressional bills," said RDC Chair Rickie Nez.

The House version of the bill, H.R.2181, sponsored by Rep. Ben Ray Luján (D-N.M.-3), and cosponsored by Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva (D-AZ-1), Rep. Debra A. Haaland (D-N.M.-1), Rep. Xochitl Torres Small (D-N.M.-2), and others was passed in Oct. 2019. S.1079 is currently with the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

Speaker Damon and RDC also met with the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Transportation, the Office of Management and Budget, the Environmental Protection Agency, and staff from the Senate Committees on Indian Affairs and on Energy and Natural Resources. Legislative and Navajo Nation Washington Office staff also discussed federal priorities for 2020, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous People initiative, abandoned uranium mine cleanup expansion, water and power infrastructure, and increased funding for Navajo Nation roads during the three-day policy trip.

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