



White House, Council host update discussion with Chapters

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 11, 2020

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — On a teleconference meeting Thursday, the White House Council on Native American Affairs Executive Director Tyler Fish and members of the Navajo Nation Council hosted a discussion with Navajo Nation Chapters on the federal government’s Native American affairs initiatives and its latest response to COVID-19.

The White House re-established the Council on Native American Affairs May 4 and named Tyler Fish, formerly a senior policy advisor and tribal liaison to the White House, as its executive director.

More than 50 chapter officials listened to the discussion and interacted with delegates to address pressing local needs with Director Fish. The discussion was facilitated by Speaker Seth Damon and helped provide chapter officials with an overview on the priorities being addressed by the Legislative Branch in coordination with the White House.

Fish, who is Mvskoke Creek and Cherokee, opened by thanking the Council and chapter leaders for the opportunity to speak directly to Navajo leaders.

“We welcome the White House in their effort to work directly with the Navajo Nation Council to improve the level of overall coordination on Navajo issues,” said 24th Navajo Nation Council Speaker Seth Damon. “This builds on existing work by delegates in the areas of public safety, water and telecommunications infrastructure, veterans issues and more.”

Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty, chairwoman of the Navajo Nation Sexual Assault Subcommittee, began by offering to provide some needs the nation is facing with addressing domestic violence issues, shelters, missing and murdered indigenous peoples (MMIP) and more. Director Fish accepted the invitation for a follow-up discussion and added that the federal MMIP task force continues to adjust to the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

“As a former Marine and Iraq war veteran, myself, I want to say that you all have my utmost respect as leaders of your communities. You really are front-line workers,” said Fish.

Fish continued with an overview on the White House Council on Native American Affairs. Fish said the council was stood up under Executive Order 13647 and includes a broad variety of executive department, agency and office heads.

He shared the White House’s priority policy categories but emphasized that it will take partnership with local leaders to ensure specific needs are addressed. “I acknowledge that, being an official in [Washington, D.C.], we don’t know everything there is to know about Indian Country from our stance here. It takes the real-world feedback from tribal leaders to let us understand how we can be most effective to your communities,” said Fish.

The policy categories included: Economic development and rural prosperity, infrastructure, public health, public safety, cultural resources, veterans affairs, workforce development and education, and energy development. Right now, noted Fish, the council is continuing to focus on interagency coordination for Indian Country among federal agencies. Going forward, the council will also begin to focus on ways

a recovery effort following the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to systemic improvements in infrastructure and public health systems.

The infrastructure needs in Indian Country, said Fish, will be a specific priority area of the council as an integrated approach to tackling multiple categories. “How do we come out of COVID-19 with a better infrastructure posture than when we went in?” stated Fish. “Infrastructure cuts across several different priority needs that we’re going to have for recovery.”

“I can’t do any of these things without the real world feedback that I receive from you guys, you, Speaker Damon, from delegates and chapter leaders as well,” said Fish. He said the feedback on areas of deficiencies allow him to approach different federal agencies with specific instances where resources can be identified.

Speaker Damon thanked Director Fish for his introduction to the discussion and for taking the time to listen to local Navajo leaders and initiatives.

On the call, Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. advocated for improved direct services on the Navajo Nation by federal programs. “Currently, Navajo veterans have to go off the reservation to get services,” said Delegate Begay. He said there are approximately 10,000 veterans on the Navajo Nation, which is a population size that can be easily served with on-reservation veterans services.

Adding to the discussion, Council Delegate Daniel Tso, chairman of the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee, highlighted the impacts of insufficient health funding throughout recent history which have worsened the effects of COVID-19.

“It shows right to this day, we have a limited number of ICU beds, facilities and support infrastructure to take care of folks,” said Chairman Tso. “We always knew it, but this highlights it even more.” He stated that other programs are also underfunded, including the educational system on the Navajo Nation.

“We’re basically limited on education right now because of the lack of broadband access and access to internet services. People on the ground right now are making-do,” said Chairman Tso.

Chairman Tso also raised the issue of an impending drought throughout the southwest United States, stating that hauling water will become even more critical without an infusing of funding. Water is a critical component in maintaining personal health and hygiene.

Council Delegate Carl Slater asked Fish for greater guidance from the White House on spending the \$600 million CARES Act funding for infrastructure projects, specifically waterline projects and extensions that will support the public health of the nation.

Delegate Slater also asked for the White House’s support for waiving the requirement for tribal nations to spend the CARES Act funding by Dec. 30, 2020. He said that staff in program offices may not be able to process the greater amounts of paperwork associated with the deadline to expend money.

In responding to the request for greater support for veterans direct services from Delegate Begay, Director Fish shared that the US Veterans Health Administration and the Indian Health Service. He said updates will be collected on the status of that partnership and shared with tribal leadership.

Fish also acknowledged that Chairman Tso’s comments regarding infrastructure, healthcare, facilities, broadband and education are critical to recovering from COVID-19. “On the recruitment and retention front, that’s something we’ve been facing in Indian Country for as long as we’ve had a Bureau of Indian Affairs or a Bureau of Indian Education. How do we attract qualified candidates to fill these roles, either as medical providers or any other service provider?”

Recovering from COVID-19 requires an integrated approach to identifying the inter-agency coordination that needs to take place, along with the identification of continuing resources that support

the systemic improvement across the priority areas, explained Fish.

“As everyone can see, COVID-19 is not going away any time soon,” said Fish.

Council Delegate Otto Tso, chairman of the Navajo Hopi Land Commission, emphasized the issue of water access and infrastructure, particularly in the Western Navajo Agency. “I’m hoping that collaboration with internal agencies, with the Indian Health Service Office of Environmental Health, can be a part of this factor of extending water to those that don’t have running water,” said Delegate Tso.

He also raised the issue of housing support during the COVID-19 outbreak. “A lot of these housing dollars that are coming down the pipe, it really doesn’t give us much,” said Delegate Tso. He illustrated an issue where 4-5 families may live in a household, which complicates the containment of COVID-19 when just one person in that residence contracts the disease.

In adding to Delegate Slater’s comments, Delegate Tso said, “Our process that we have to go through, even for a simple right of way, when it gets to the BIA Regional Office, it takes time, time, time. It takes about a year to get right of way approval in the current process that is governed by the [Code of Federal Regulations].”

Delegate Tso also advocated for the nearly 1.6 million acres of Navajo Nation land that was impacted by the federal freeze on development in the western Navajo region. “We’re trying to catch up with housing and infrastructure,” said Delegate Tso.

Council Delegate Mark Freeland, chairman of the State Task Force Subcommittee, emphasized water and electricity infrastructure. “The latest project listing from the Indian Health Service has about 3,500 households on the Navajo Nation that are currently waiting for waterline infrastructure.”

“If we were to really emphasize bringing clean water to our peoples homes, imagine how much of a change we could really bring for our people,” said Delegate Freeland. Part of that process, he said, is the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) protocols for developing water projects on the Navajo Nation. He emphasized the importance of coming to an agreement to put a faster system in place so the Navajo Nation can complete water projects in the time the government has.

Delegate Freeland also added to Delegate Slater’s request for an extension, “If we were to encumber the majority of that \$600 million, would that be sufficient? Or would you actually need to see something besides it being encumbered? If we were to encumber a lot of that money towards water and electric projects for our people, would that be sufficient in the eyes of the United State government?”

Speaker Damon continued by recognizing Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown, who shared that he has met with the Navajo Police Department lieutenant, Navajo Nation judges and local shelters. “Domestic violence is going up, and it’s all going back to alcohol use,” said Delegate Brown.

Delegate Brown underscored the trust responsibility of the federal government to work with the Navajo Nation to help increase the capacity of an already strained justice and public safety system.

“Chief Francisco, the Navajo Nation Chief of Police, when I asked him on a western agency conference call, he said, ‘I honestly don’t know how to respond to this. I don’t know.’ Police officers told me, in dealing with bootleggers, ‘We have rights, also.’” said Delegate Brown. He expressed the need for CARES Act funding to be spent helping the Navajo Nation’s public safety personnel in addressing not just enforcement of the nation’s lockdown, but all the other needs that are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Do we close the Nation for a whole month like other nations have done? And have National Guard come in to partner with us,” said Delegate Brown. “That’s what I’m interested in.”

Fish responded to both Delegates Tso and Freeland by pointing out that water infrastructure will provide the most value for the Nation’s use of COVID-19 recovery funding. Fish said this will help in

ensuring citizens have access to plumbing and sanitary water to wash their hands and to help them keep their homes in clean order to prevent COVID-19 or other viruses from spreading.

In addition to the IHS Office of Environmental Health, Fish also stated the US Environmental Protection Agency's Indian Country water quality committee can be looked to for improving water quality and access.

With respect to Delegate's Freeland's comments on the NEPA process, Fish pointed to new language issued by the Council on Environmental Quality recently that encourages greater participation by tribal governments. Fish noted that the rules incorporated a few of the suggestions made by the Resources and Development Committee on their advocacy trip to Washington, D.C. in January.

"I'm hoping that is one pathway where tribes and the Navajo Nation itself can exercise in their favor. A big point that was included was a greater respect for tribal NEPA processes," said Fish. He said tribes may submit processes for approval and through that, clear many of the hurdles traditionally faced by tribal nations.

Fish acknowledged the viewpoint expressed by Chief Francisco with respect to handling the enforcement of COVID-19 primary and secondary effects. "Alcohol is a contributing factor," said Fish. He said the federal Operation Lady Justice task force focused on missing and murdered indigenous people also focuses on domestic violence. Fish acknowledged that discord in the home is becoming a greater issue because some prisoners are returning to households where the victim is still living. "The individual who was the victim doesn't have any where else to go. They're stuck in a confined space with somebody who might have been their abuser in the past," said Fish.

"We're bringing a lot of ideas forward right now with the Operation Lady Justice task force to develop an agenda on how we're going to start this discussion back up," said Fish.

Council Delegate Rickie Nez, chairman of the Resources and Development Committee, stated, "The Navajo People are really without clean water, Director Fish." He added that many Navajo citizens melt snow in the winter and take water from irrigations canals in the summer for filtering and domestic use. "We would like to have a priority to have running water for every home on the Navajo Nation," said Chairman Nez.

Council Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton stated, "We are experiencing a shortage of officers and criminal investigators here on the Navajo Nation. I've spoken to our federal delegation about this and we're seeing huge impacts at this time." She pressed upon the importance of adding Navajo Nation public safety facilities to federal operations and maintenance listing.

"I would really appreciate your assistance. We also need better telecommunications with addressing dead-zones for officers, as well as internet and broadband," said Chairwoman Charles-Newton. She also invited Director Fish to the Navajo Nation to see public safety facilities.

Director Fish thanked all the members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council and the chapter officials listening to the discussion. The Office of the Speaker will continue to follow up with Director Fish and the White House Council on Native American Affairs to provide a direct line of communication with the US Federal Government.

###