



Navajo Leadership Embraces “Naabik’iyáti” with U.S. Senator Ben Ray Luján

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 2, 2021



PHOTO: Lionel Haskie, Maintenance and Operations Manager for NAPI, gives tour to Navajo leadership of Kutz substation.

FARMINGTON, NM — On Thursday, Navajo Nation leaders met with U.S. Sen. Ben Ray Luján (D-NM) at the Navajo Agricultural Products Industry (NAPI) Headquarters to hear issues regarding the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project (NIIP) and the proposed Chaco Protection Act.

NAPI officials welcomed members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council, Sen. Luján, his constituents, Navajo Nation Vice President Myron Lizer, and Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Santee Lewis before discussing the shortcomings on the operations and maintenance of NIIP.

NIIP — which was established in 1962 to irrigate 110,630 acres of farmland on NAPI — is federally owned, operated, and maintained by NAPI through Public Law 93-638 federal contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

“NIIP was a project envisioned by the federal government and the Navajo Nation in the 1970s, but has not been completed while the Navajo people have been patient to see the full development of the facility come to fruition,” said Council Delegate Eugenia Charles-Newton (Shiprock). “This visit from Sen. Ben Ray Luján brings hope that the neglect of the BIA will be addressed pertaining to the operations and maintenance of NIIP.”

Afterwards, a tour was provided by Lawrence Platero, the Chairperson for NAPI's Board Members, and Lionel Haskie, NAPI's Operations & Maintenance Manager, to Kutz Canyon Pump to highlight the need for additional congressional funding to address the issues of NIIP.

Many of NIIP's pumping, substation, and conveyance systems were built prior to 1985 and are now in disrepair, which has led to constant repairs that can no longer be deferred.

WIIN allocates \$10 million to 17 federally-owned Indian Irrigation Projects, resulting in NIIP being awarded \$2.335 million per year to address these deferred costs.

In order to address deferred maintenance and replacement costs, both the Navajo Nation and NAPI have requested \$35 million through the Water Infrastructure Improvement for the Nation (WIIN) Act in Fiscal Year 2022.

"Sen. Lujan came and we were able to communicate with Washington leadership to address their important concerns that NIIP needs, which is funding," said Council Delegate Rickie Nez (T'iistsoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tsé Daa K'aan, Newcomb, San Juan). "I'm just glad that we were able to convey that to him and ask him to continue advocating on behalf of our Navajo people."

Following the NAPI meeting, Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh), Council Delegate Mark Freeland (Becenti, Lake Valley, Náhodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint), Council Delegate Daniel Tso (Littlewater, Pueblo Pintado, Torreón, Whitehorse Lake, Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Ojo Encino, Counselor), Council Delegate Jamie Henio (Alamo, Ramah, Tóhajiilee), and Council Delegate Rickie Nez (T'iistsoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tsé Daa K'aan, Newcomb, San Juan) met with Sen. Luján and Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez at Dzilth-Na-O-Dith-Hle Community School to hear from those interested and affected by the proposed Chaco Protection Act.

Currently, the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act of 2021 is pending introduction as Sen. Luján will introduce the bill in the Senate in July.

The act seeks to respect and protect the legal rights of tribes and tribal members in the area. Additionally, the bill provides clarity that it withdraws only federal land and minerals only from future development. Stating that nothing in the act:

"Affects the mineral rights of an Indian Tribe or member of an Indian to trust land or allotment land or;

"Precludes improvements to, or rights-of-way for water, power, or road development on, the Federal land to assist communities adjacent to or in the vicinity of the Federal land."

However, much of the concerns and questions that Navajo Nation leaders and community members raised was with the language of the bill that protects the rights of Navajo Nation allottees as well as other Indian Tribes.

Sen. Luján stated that he would include the word "A member of the Navajo Nation" and "utilities" to further protect Navajo allottees specifically.

Constituents invited to the meeting voiced that the proposed 10-mile buffer zone that seeks to protect sacred sites and artifacts around Chaco Canyon impacts the allotment leasing of mineral, oil, and gas rights to Navajo allottees.

Delora Hesuse, a Navajo allottee with land in Nageezi, Lybrook, and Dzilth-Na-O-Dith-Hle expressed her frustration during the meeting with Navajo and Congressional leadership.

“They’re not hearing us, so everything they got on the table, we were never consulted but once they got the bill going, we were the last ones to know. So that’s all we’re just trying to express – we just want to be heard with issues about our allotments,” said Hesuse.

Additionally, others voiced that the buffer zone helps protect the environment and site from further fracking incidents.

Speaker Seth Damon stated that the Navajo Nation is firm on the 5-mile buffer zone and allowing allottees to use their lands however they wish. Expressing that even he is unable to use his allotments in his community while understanding that continued fracking affects the foundation of K’é itself.

“We don’t own those allotments – they’re just little lands to say that the BIA still holds the rights over it. We can’t sell those and can’t do anything about them,” said Damon.

“I thank you (Sen. Luján) for coming to the Navajo Nation, especially working together with Chairman Nez, Hon. Halona, and Navajo Nation Vice President at NAPI and then coming here to listen to the stories of the Navajo people and our struggles to see what assistance we can do to make sure tomorrow is better for our Navajo people,” said Damon

The Navajo Nation Council plans to continue to work with Sen. Luján in order to have community members’ voices heard on this issue and how it impacts them to develop a plan of action and to change the language in the bill.

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