



State of the Navajo Nation Address

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer
Presented to the 24th Navajo Nation Council
Fall Council Session – October 18, 2021

Yá'át'ééh to the Honorable Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council, Speaker Seth Damon, Chief Justice JoAnn B. Jayne, as well as chapter, county, state, and federal leaders, and most importantly our Diné Citizens. On behalf of the Nez-Lizer Administration, we are pleased to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address for the 2021 Fall Council Session.

For our Diné people, the start of October is known as Gháájí', the transition of the seasons. On October 6th we had a new moon, signifying the beginning of a new year for our people. Nihimá Nahasdzáán, our Mother Earth, is letting us know that it is time to prepare for the changing of the weather and seasons – this is also an opportunity for all of us to reflect on our lives and to renew our hope for ourselves, our family, and our communities.

Now is the time to prepare our homes for the upcoming winter season by gathering firewood, food and water, blankets, livestock supplies, and other essential items. We have to remain mindful and remember our elders as well. We encourage children and grandchildren to help their elders within the community so they are safe and healthy throughout the winter season.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Navajo people have demonstrated the strength and resilience of our ancestors. We have been met with many adversities that have changed our daily lives, but we remain strong and full of hope for the next chapter in our lives.

Our public health experts continue to urge our people to get vaccinated, wear a mask in public, practice social distancing, and minimize travel to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to lower the numbers of hospitalizations and lives lost. Through the public health emergency orders

from our health experts, we have been able to bring down the number of COVID-19 cases on the Navajo Nation, but we have to remain diligent and continue to adhere to their advice. We also thank all of our frontline warriors for everything they are doing to fight for our Navajo people and save lives during this pandemic.

During the month of October, the Navajo Nation also recognizes Breast Cancer Awareness Month and Domestic Violence Prevention Month. For many of our Navajo families, these modern-day monsters are a part of their daily lives and we must continue to work together to provide more support to help our people and those who work directly with them.

The teachings of our elders are also crucial to overcoming adversities and maintaining hope and faith. Through the practice of T'áá hwó' ajít'éego, self-reliance and self-determination, we are stronger and more capable of persevering and prospering in this new season.

Gháájí' is a time for reflection, a time for reverence, a time for prayer, and a time to plan for our future. May our Creator watch over all of our Diné people during the upcoming winter season and bless us with many new opportunities for the future.

Before we proceed with the State of the Navajo Nation Address, we ask everyone to join us in a moment of silence in honor and remembrance of our former President, Speaker, and Vietnam veteran – the late Honorable Kelsey Begaye, who passed away on August 13th. We honor and recognize him, his wife Marie, and all of their children and grandchildren for their sacrifices and service for our Navajo people.

Now, as we look ahead to the full implementation of the American Rescue Plan Act funds totaling over \$2.1 billion. We met with the Council on Friday, and presented a plan that would provide at least \$780 million for water, powerlines, broadband, housing, and bathroom additions. It would also provide \$350 million for direct services in our communities related to education, health care, social services, economic development, and tourism. \$220 million would be allocated for chapter projects and \$100 million for enterprises. The previous resolution, CJY-41-21, allocated approximately \$207 million for another round of hardship assistance and we are open to expediting that process to get those funds out to our people as quickly as

possible. In order to increase the amount for hardship assistance, it will require the support of the Council to amend CJY-41-21.

As of Friday, a total of \$411 million of ARPA funding has been allocated to replenish defunded CARES Act allocations and appropriations that were previously funded through the Navajo Nation's Síhasin Fund and Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance (UUFB), in accordance with Resolution CJY-41-21. This creates leverage for our Nation to use these funds to address more needs for our people.

The comprehensive project listing compiled by the Executive Branch for the Navajo Nation exceeds \$18 billion. Clearly, \$2 billion will not meet all of the needs in our communities, but it is a start and it is an opportunity to improve the quality of life for future generations through infrastructure development and other initiatives included in the proposal.

The FY2022 Comprehensive Budget is complete and funding became available on October 1st for direct services, programs, and support for our Nation. We thank the 24th Navajo Nation Council, Speaker Damon, Divisions and Programs, OMB, OOC, and all of the support staff who provided guidance and support for the past several months as the budget moved through the process. We understand that there are many needs in our communities and for our people, and together, we spent a great amount of time deliberating and making tough decisions. With this budget, we want to continue on the path of working together to address any remaining issues and concerns.

We want to make it clear that the FY2022 Comprehensive Budget fully funds many key services and programs that benefit Navajo veterans, elders, youth, and provides support for prosecutors, criminal investigators, and public safety officials.

As of Oct. 1st, the Navajo Nation Department of Criminal Investigations received over \$10 million from General Funds and External Funds combined and carryover funding from FY2021 that is estimated to be over \$1 million. We explained to the public that the line-item veto authority was used for \$881,000 for the Department of Criminal Investigations because the department was already set to receive the \$1 million in additional carryover funding, and that if there is a need for additional funding down the road, we will work with the Council to address and fund those needs.

As for our Navajo veterans, full funding was approved. Not a single dollar or penny was line-item vetoed. We recognize that there are differing opinions among veterans as to whether the funds for benefits that help veterans should be allocated under the Navajo Veterans Administration or the Chapter Veterans Organizations (CVO's). The current budget allocates the funds under the Navajo Veterans Administration. However, if the majority of veterans want the funds to be reallocated under the Chapter Veterans Organizations to administer, then we will support that through an amendment to the Comprehensive Budget resolution, which will be subject to a vote of the Navajo Nation Council.

As for the policies for financial assistance from the Navajo Nation's Veterans Trust Fund, Vice President Myron Lizer and I have met with veterans on several occasions to hear their concerns and to work toward solutions that help make the process easier. One example is the requirement for veterans to submit receipts for the assistance they receive. Many veterans shared their concerns and frustration with this process. We proposed to simply have the person provide a signature certifying that the funds were used for the intended purposes. If a veteran submits a request for assistance, we should make the process as simple as possible, while ensuring accountability of Navajo funds.

In regards to veterans housing, the Navajo Veterans Administration successfully advocated for changes to the Veterans Housing Program policies that were needed to advance the program. Again, accountability of funds and the quality of homes are paramount to the new veterans' housing policies. The necessary amendments to the veterans housing policy were recently approved by the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee to allow the construction of homes to move forward. Today, the Navajo Veterans Administration begins the process of assessing sites for the construction of new homes for veterans. We will have new homes for Navajo veterans built very soon.

Last week, Director James Zwierlein provided a report to the Naabik'iyáti' Committee regarding home repairs for Navajo veterans who previously received new homes at the start of the housing program years ago. Unfortunately, we are having to spend time and resources to revisit 125 homes and conduct repairs due to the substandard construction years ago.

Improvements are happening and we will continue to see more progress in the days and weeks ahead.

We have the utmost respect for all veterans, our warriors who served this country and the Navajo Nation with remarkable courage. As we continue to work through the policy issues that hinder progress at times, we all must remember that we are five-fingered beings, and despite our struggles, we want the best for our Navajo people. Yes, there are challenges and frustrations along the way, but we are fully committed to working together, creating the changes that are needed, and moving forward.

When it comes to federal issues, we want to highlight the successful restoration of the Bears Ears National Monument to 1.36 million acres. This is a monumental win for our people, our ancestors, and future generations. Bears Ears is home to many of our historical and cultural sites, plants, water, traditional medicines, and teachings for our people.

We recognize and thank the Navajo Nation Council, past and present members, the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition and many others who stood together for many years, and never gave up. During the signing of the proclamation, we had the opportunity to speak one on one with President Biden on a number of issues.

We also had discussions with Secretary Deb Haaland and Assistant Secretary Bryan Newland, and we spoke about the need to secure more funding to continue extending the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project to reach more Navajo communities and homes, missing and murdered Indigenous relatives, and the federal infrastructure bill being considered by Congress.

Our administration also continues to support the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative to identify burial sites and bring our children home. From there, we can try to begin to heal our people so that our children and future generations will be more empowered by all of the adversities and wrongdoings that our people have endured, overcome, and persevered through to be where we are today. As Navajo people, we've demonstrated our resilience time and time again throughout history and to this day.

Another initiative that is a high priority for our Administration is the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) Amendments of 2021, which was introduced in the U.S House and Senate on September 22nd.

The Radiation Exposure Compensation Act was first enacted in 1990, then amended in 2000, and is set to expire in 2022. The amendments introduced last month would extend the Act until 2040, expand downwinder eligibility based on geographic residency and expand the range of years that can be used for calculating exposure for certain individuals working in uranium mines, mills, or transporting uranium ore.

We strongly support this bill, but also urge Congress to go further to include all downwinders, to expand eligibility for coverage under the program to include additional categories of uranium workers and types of cancers and other radiation-related illnesses, and to increase the compensation cap to a minimum of \$200,000 per individual regardless of worker classification or category of disease.

Last Wednesday, Delegate Crotty joined us for a meeting with the Navajo Uranium Radiation Victims Committee. Phil Harrison, Jr., Tommy Reed, Harry Desiderio, Leslie Begay, and Jerry Benally shared with us the challenges and injustices that they experience when it comes to receiving medical treatment and services that should already be afforded to them. I thank each of them for sharing their concerns and for being at the table to help us move forward.

The RECA Amendments of 2021 presents an opportunity for Congress to work with the Navajo Nation, the Navajo Uranium Radiation Victims Committee, and other impacted groups to appropriately extend RECA's coverage. Working with the Council, Honorable Amber Kanazbah Crotty, and the Navajo Nation Washington Office, we will continue to fight for the passage of this bill in Congress.

Uranium exposure and the devastating health issues are common in many of our communities. In September, Council Delegate Thomas Walker, Jr. joined us as we met with U.S. EPA Administrator Michael S. Regan and Congressmen Tom O'Halleran as we visited one uranium mine site in Cameron, Arizona. We had a productive discussion and we will continue to move forward on the remediation of those sites.

This past weekend, we also visited the Red Water Pond Road Community to hear their concerns and continue our united opposition to the transfer of uranium mine waste at the Northeast Church Rock abandoned uranium mine site, located close to the Navajo Nation. Earlier this year, we submitted

comments outlining our concerns for the Environmental Impact Statement and we will continue to stand with our people who strongly oppose the transfer of uranium mine waste near our communities.

As we move forward with redistricting across the country, we take this opportunity to thank the 24th Navajo Nation Council and the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission for their support and commitment to working with our administration and the designated state commissions and groups to establish boundaries that empower and protect the voices and representation of our Navajo people. After the 2020 election, we know the power of the Navajo vote. We know that we have the power to change the outcomes of elections at every level.

Now that the states have moved forward with their proposed maps, we have to continue working together and with other tribes to present a united voice. Recently, Speaker Damon, Delegate Daniel Tso, and Wilson Stewart, Jr. joined us as we met with the All Pueblo Council of Governors to negotiate and reach as much consensus as possible on redistricting maps in the State of New Mexico. We appreciate the Council's continued support as we now turn our attention to the state legislatures who have the authority to develop one map for the states.

In the state of Arizona, many of our people from the grassroots level are voicing support for Just Transition funds and resources from the state and utility companies to help recover from the closure of coal plants and to support post-coal economies. Our administration stands with them in support and we have provided testimony before the Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC) and met with their membership to advocate for just transition funds, including \$100 million that APS is agreeable to paying the Navajo Nation. We will continue to push forward and urge the ACC to do the right thing by not standing in the way of the proposed agreement with Arizona Public Service.

Before we close, we also want to take a moment to highlight some of the recent success of the Navajo Division of Transportation (NDOT). We know that the improvement of roads across our Nation is always a top priority and one of the top needs in nearly every community. Within the last two or three months, we've worked with the Council and NDOT to move the following road and transportation projects forward:

- In August, we came together with Hard Rock Chapter and Council Delegate Jimmy Yellowhair to finalize a resolution approved by the 24th Navajo Nation Council that appropriated \$19.5 million to pave existing dirt roads between the communities of Hard Rock and Pinon – an initiative that many leaders and local residents have supported for many years.
- In the month of August, we also joined Council Delegate Thomas Walker, Jr. and Birdsprings Chapter to mark the start of construction of a nearly seven-mile stretch of N71 that will include pavement of the existing dirt road, which serves as a primary bus route for the 100-plus students who attend Little Singer Community School and for many local residents.
- In September, we joined 24th Navajo Nation Council members, Navajo Area Bureau of Indian Affairs Regional Director Gregory Mehojah, and Tsé Si áni Chapter officials, to celebrate the completion of the construction of a new two-lane concrete bridge along N9402 in the community of Tsé Si áni, located approximately 22-miles south of Window Rock, Ariz. The new bridge replaces a deteriorated wooden bridge that was constructed over 40 years ago and often created transportation challenges for local residents, school buses, first responders, and others.
- Also in September, we joined U.S. Sen. Ben Ray Luján, Manuelito Chapter President Milton Davis, McKinley County Commission Chairman Billy Moore, New Mexico State Reps. Patricia Lundstrom and D. Wonda Johnson, Navajo Area Bureau of Indian Affairs Regional Director Gregory Mehojah, and local residents, to celebrate the completion of the repair and replacement of the Manuelito Canyon Bridge that serves many Navajo residents.
- In late September, we joined Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. to mark the completion of road improvements for Navajo Route 8085 and Navajo Route 251 in the communities of Many Farms and Tselani/Cottonwood, which included five miles of earthwork, reestablishing the ditch line, base course placement, soil, and gravel stabilization for N8085 in Many Farms. Project N251 in Tselani/Cottonwood included 15 miles of grading, subgrade, aggregate

base course, drainage structures, road signs, guardrails, and riprap placement.

- Last week, we joined Council Delegate Edmund Yazzie and Mariano Lake Chapter officials, as NDOT and Navajo Engineering and Construction Authority (NECA) finished the first phase of the N11 road project, which included new pavement for approximately 3.7 miles of the 12-mile road to help address safety concerns and improve access for school, work, commerce, health, and emergency response. The project, funded by the Federal Highway Administration Tribal Transportation Program, also included grading, subgrade treatment, drainage structures, one bridge, fencing, cattle guards, gates, and new signage.

NDOT, under Mr. Garret Silversmith, has made good progress just within the last three months and they continue to work on many more projects in multiple communities across the Navajo Nation.

As we look ahead, our administration continues to request the support of the Council to set-aside \$50 million from the Síhasin Fund to establish an endowment to create more scholarship opportunities for Navajo students. As leaders, we must look many years ahead and think of our generations to come. With uncertainties in revenue and the federal budget, we must invest in scholarships so that we build our capacity to provide scholarship assistance for the growing number of students who are pursuing their educational goals.

As we move forward, our administration remains focused on addressing and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We continue to urge our Navajo people to get fully vaccinated and to take all precautions, including wearing masks to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and the variants. We also take this opportunity to once again thank all of the frontline warriors and all of our Navajo Nation employees, and all of our county, state, and federal partners for your dedication and hard work in the midst of this pandemic.

We join our Navajo people in praying for strength, wisdom, protection, and good health. We thank them for supporting all of our Nation's leaders. Together, we face many difficult challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic and with creating a brighter future for the Navajo Nation. It is incumbent

upon us as leaders to work together, to put differences aside, and address the issues that create barriers to progress and create real change.

Our ancestors passed down many good teachings, prayers, and values that have withstood the test of time and many adversities. Teachings such as T'áá hwó'ajít'éego, or self-reliance and self-determination, will help us along the way in everything that we strive to accomplish for our people. We thank you for the opportunity to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address and we wish you a productive Fall Council Session. May God bless each of you and may God bless the Great Navajo Nation.