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– JOINT PRESS RELEASE –

Niłch' Éí Bee Ííná – Air is Life Act signed into law to promote a Healthier
and Commercial Smoke-free Navajo Nation

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — On Saturday, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer were joined by members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council and the Air is Life Coalition, as they signed into the law the “Niłch' Éí Bee Ííná – Air is Life Act of 2021” through Resolution CO-58-21, which prohibits using commercial tobacco products in enclosed and indoor areas on the Navajo Nation.

The Act states that commercial tobacco products include conventional cigarettes and pipes, cigars, e-cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco products. The new law does not restrict commercial tobacco use in private residences unless operated for childcare, adult daycare, healthcare facilities, or home offices. Most importantly, the Act does not prohibit using commercial tobacco or traditional smoke for ceremonial or cultural settings and purposes within the Navajo Nation.

“We commend the diligent work of the Air is Life Coalition for paving the way for us to be here today,” said Chairman Daniel Tso (Littlewater, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake, Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Ojo Encino, Counselor). “The perseverance of Dr. Patricia Nez-Henderson and her team deserves recognition. It is an honor to have been asked to sponsor this historic legislation. The Navajo Nation Council has spoken loudly that the health of the Navajo people is valuable and not to be gambled with.”

The Air is Life Coalition has been working collaboratively for over 13 years to educate the public on the dangers and risks of secondhand smoke and assisted the Navajo Nation to establish this comprehensive smoke-free bill.

“The Air is Life Act is a monumental achievement and bold step in the right direction to promote healthy living among our Navajo people. Secondhand smoke can cause health issues among nonsmokers, such as children and elders. Public health professionals have concluded that the only way to protect nonsmokers and vulnerable populations from secondhand smoke is to require smoke-free workplaces and public places. It is a fundamental right to protect our Navajo people’s right to breathe clean air,” said President Jonathan Nez, who also thanked the 24th Navajo Nation Council for their support of the legislation.

Heath, Education, and Human Services Committee (HEHSC) Chairman Daniel Tso is the bill sponsor, with Speaker Seth Damon, Delegate Carl Slater, and Delegate Nathaniel Brown as cosponsors. In October, the Act was unanimously passed by 20 votes in favor.

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“The health of our people is important to our future as the largest Sovereign Nation in the country,” said Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh). “Our health studies show through the data that you live a shorter life with every cigarette you light or secondhand smoke you inhale. This resolution ensures we end it in our public places and tribal office buildings for the safety of all. The Navajo Nation Council commends Chairman Daniel Tso for his leadership as a sponsor of this bill and we commend President Jonathan Nez for working alongside us to make history today.”

The signed resolution enacts the Air is Life Act in Title 13 of the Navajo Nation Code. The Navajo Department of Health and the Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety will enforce the provisions and issue violations for any penalties.

“Continued efforts to promote the implementation of comprehensive smoke-free laws are critical to protect nonsmokers from preventable health problems in workplaces, public places, and events. The health effects from commercial products include stroke, lung cancer, heart disease, asthma, and others. Smoke-free laws have been shown to improve indoor air quality, reduce secondhand smoke exposure, change social norms regarding the acceptability of smoking, prevent youth and young adult smoking addiction, and reduce heart attack and asthma hospitalizations among nonsmokers. As leaders, we have to ensure the well-being and health of our Navajo citizens,” said Vice President Myron Lizer.

The Act now prohibits using commercial tobacco products in enclosed, indoor workplaces or public places, and within 25 feet of any indoor area across the Navajo Nation.

“Our health coalition has been working tirelessly for the last 13 years with our Navajo communities and leadership for this day to come. I am grateful to the Honorable President Nez, Council Delegate Daniel Tso, the 24th Navajo Nation Council, and our Chapter leaders for putting the health of our people first. This historic law will have a positive impact on the health of the Navajo people and future generations to come. Niłch’ éí Bee Ííńá – Air is Life is not only the essence of historic health policy, but it is the foundation of our Navajo teachings. It is these teachings that created the path for this moment,” said Dr. Patricia Nez-Henderson.

“Niłch’ éí Bee Ííńá represents the oxygen we breathe to live and exist every day,” said Delegate Nathaniel Brown (Dennehotso, Kayenta, Chííłchinbii’tó). “We need to protect our people at all costs and this includes our hard working staff employed by the casinos. We all know the health risks from commercial tobacco, including deadly cancers. Life is sacred and this resolution sends that message across Indian Country today.”

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