



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

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Lack of Tribal Consultation by the Interior Department regarding Chaco Canyon a major concern for Navajo Nation leaders

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PHOTO: Resources and Development Committee Chairman Rickie Nez of the 24th Navajo Nation Council meets with the White House Tribal Affairs Office in Washington, D.C.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Chairman Rickie Nez and members of the Resources and Development Committee (RDC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council share concern over the lack of tribal consultation by the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) regarding the Biden Administration’s proposal of a 20-year ban on oil and gas drilling within a 10-mile radius of the Chaco Culture National Historical Park in northwestern New Mexico.

Last week, federal officials from the Farmington Bureau of Land Management (BLM) field office and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) joined the RDC for a leadership meeting to discuss their proposal to prohibit any new entry on public federal lands that is authorized under the Mining Law of 1872. The DOI plans to withdraw land approximately 351,500 acres around Chaco Canyon in the eastern agency of the Navajo Nation.

“The Biden Administration and Interior Department bypassed previous requests to Congress for field hearings and for federal officials to hear directly from our Navajo families residing in the Chaco Canyon region. The Navajo Nation continues to advocate for a 5-mile buffer within and around this sacred landscape. It is important that the federal government follow the Biden memorandum that directs all federal agencies to honor tribal sovereignty and include the voices of tribes in policy deliberations that affect their communities,” said Chairman Rickie Nez (T’iistsoh

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Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tsé Daa K'aan, Newcomb, San Juan).

On January 26, 2021, the Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships was signed by President Joe Biden and provided a blueprint for federal agencies to follow.

“We are sharing the concerns of our Navajo families who own allotments that will be impacted by the decisions of the Bureau of Land Management and Interior Secretary Debra Haaland. The Navajo Nation Council passed a resolution to maintain a 5-mile buffer zone for the Chaco Canyon region and it is supported by President Jonathan Nez. As leaders of the largest tribal nation in the United States, it is our duty to hold the federal government accountable. We will always protect our natural resources, our sacred land and water, and the voices of our people,” said Council Delegate Wilson Stewart Jr. (Fort Defiance, Crystal, Red Lake, Sawmill).

As the primary stakeholder of trust, fee, and allotted land, the Navajo Nation continues to request for a Congressional field hearing and meetings with the Interior Department and Secretary Debra Haaland to hear directly from allottees. Additionally, the completion of a subsequent ethnographic study has yet to be completed, even though action has already been taken.

“The federal withdrawal of lands by the Bureau of Land Management will severely impact the Navajo Nation and our allottees. It is important that meaningful and adequate tribal consultation be had to have all parties involved in order to properly understand the true intent. The White House stated that any decisions impacting a sovereign tribal nation would involve consultation, and this has yet to happen with the Navajo Nation,” said Council Delegate Mark Freeland (Becenti, Lake Valley, Náhodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint).

April 6, 2022, is the deadline for the newly proposed administrative moratorium for public comments and tribal consultation before an environmental analysis per the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is submitted to the Interior Secretary for consideration.

Members of the RDC continue to engage Congressional representatives and the White House on the economic and environmental priorities of the Navajo Nation.

“The Biden Administration must respect our tribal sovereignty and what the government to government relationship entails. The Chaco Canyon Cultural Historical Site is located on sovereign Navajo land and the federal government has a sacred trust responsibility to work with Navajo leaders to solve this matter in the best interest of the Navajo people,” said Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh).

In January 2020, the Naabik'iyáti' Committee passed Resolution No. NABIJA-05-20 opposing H.R. 2181 and S. 1079 - “The Chaco Heritage Area Protection Act of 2019” - until a buffer zone surrounding the Chaco Culture National Historical Park was reduced to 5 miles.

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