



# STATE OF THE NAVAJO NATION ADDRESS

*President Buu Nygren*

*Presented to the*

**25<sup>th</sup> NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL**

April 17, 2023





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**G**ood afternoon Madam Speaker, Madam Vice President, Madam Chief Justice, Navajo Nation Council Delegates, relatives, honored guests and to the Navajo People.

Let me begin with a moment to remember Navajo Nation President Peterson Zah and Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly who left us last month.

I felt a deep sadness and sympathy for their families upon hearing the news.

I knew Dr. Zah from Arizona State University where he served as 1<sup>st</sup> Special Advisor on American Indian Initiatives to ASU President after leading our Nation.

President Ben Shelly was also an inspiration to me. His loss came as a shock to the Navajo people as well. President Shelly did not take the ordinary path to leadership. Long before his government service, he had a passion for building and fixing things.

Since taking office 98 days ago, one of the most important things I've done is re-establish relationships with Biden's Cabinet members, members of Congress, federal officials, state governors and others.

I've visited Washington frequently, most recently last week for BIA budget consultations.

In March, I joined 17 other tribal presidents, chiefs and governors to present oral testimony before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies on our needs.

I've had insightful discussions with 11 Congressmen and Congresswomen, seven Senators, and 21 federal officials.

In February, I was honored to attend President Biden's State of the Union address as a guest of Sen. Mark Kelly. I've met with Interior Secretary Deb Haaland on six occasions and with Vice President Kamala Harris on her visit to Arizona in January.

I've talked to Senators Sinema and Sen. Kelly of Arizona, Senators Heinrich and Lujan of New Mexico and Senator Lee of Utah.

I met four cabinet secretaries, the treasurer of the United States, seven federal directors of the IHS, BIE, National Endowment of Humanities, USDA, and staff of the White House.

I've met with and had meaningful conversations with New Mexico Governor Lujan-Grisham, Arizona Governor Hobbs, and Utah Governor Cox.

These and other meetings are critically important for the Navajo Nation.

Each meeting delivers the clear message that the Navajo Nation President and Council want direct contact and professional relationships. The meetings demonstrate to Congress, Cabinet members, federal, state and legislative officials that the Navajo Nation is serious about our priorities.

Each of these officials know my intention and the Council's is to use all funding allocations and appropriations that we have received – whether as direct appropriations, grants to our programs, 638 contracts, capital outlay and, most important the American Rescue Plan Act – ARPA.

The single unifying message I convey to every official I meet is that any prior perception by other government entities that there is instability within the Navajo Nation government is now changing and is being replaced by our focus and unified intention.

You and I both want to build homes, build roads, bring water and power to our people, connect them with broadband and do it with the once-in-a-lifetime funding opportunity through ARPA. It is the responsibility of all of us to get this done.

When we took office in January, the first thing we confronted was the possibility of returning hundreds of millions of dollars of the \$2 billion in ARPA funding.

I can tell you now we are not going to do that and have plans underway to spend every penny. Since ARPA funds arrived in 2021, the Council did its part. Unfortunately, on the Executive side, little got done.

It's easy to allocate funding but hard to get it out the door to do the work.

Part of the problem was because our tribal systems and policies got in the way. That is now changing.

In the past 98 days, I have mobilized the Navajo Nation Fiscal Recovery Fund Office and my division directors to find ways to remove barriers to our most important ARPA priority – infrastructure.

By infrastructure I mean homes, roads, bridges, water lines, power lines, bathroom additions and broadband connectivity.

So far, we've coordinated the completion of NTUA's sub-recipient 164 review in six business days for \$96.4 million. It will let us complete community home power lines, electric lines, wiring projects, and rural solar projects.

NECA will soon receive \$150 million for bathroom additions that I want to see built everywhere.

I've instructed tribal programs to work with IHS. They have \$563 million to construct water lines through its Sanitary Deficiency Program, a program that brings water to homes that don't have running water for residents' basic health.

NDOT has nine road and drainage improvement construction projects totaling \$33 million underway in Sanostee, Dilkon, Birdsprings, Inscription House, Pinedale, Ojo Encino, Whitecone and two in Kayenta.

My administration's intention is to use all of the remainder of ARPA funds to fulfill our infrastructure goals.

To be effective and efficient by the ARPA deadline, the Navajo Nation needs to hire accountants, engineers, contract analysts and especially project managers to ensure every construction project is done correctly. Only with project managers on the job will we have thousands of projects done with the necessary attention to detail, and done to completion.

The first step is to create business units, or accounts, to spend the money for each project.

Navajo Nation OMB has set up dozens of business units totaling \$484.2 million. We already have \$215 million allocated to water projects. Without these business unit accounts in place, money cannot be spent by tribal law.

There are other roadblocks that stand in the way to achieve our goals. I will need your help to clear them out of the way.

For instance, for 1,000 bathroom additions to be built, many residences need homesite leases to comply with federal requirements on trust land.

We can build the additions, put in the water lines and wait to connect them until those families have their homesite leases completed.

I have directed the Division of Natural Resources and Land Department to find ways to expedite the homesite lease process to cut the time needed to six months rather than many years.

We want to spend our ARPA dollars but we don't want the Navajo Nation to become a magnet for companies who see our aspirations as a get-rich-quick scheme for them.

I have directed our divisions to be sure to stretch every dollar and to ensure each one benefits the Navajo people.

It's also time for our tribal enterprises, which were created to employ Navajos and earn revenue for the Navajo Nation, to begin delivering dividends more frequently.

We will certainly offer our guidance to let them know what we expect. But I will let all of them know that I will support them when they deliver as expected but they will lose my support if they don't.

This will demonstrate to our Navajo people that we are serious about clarity and transparency of the people's money, and how it's being used.

I am recommending today that we require Navajo enterprises to make quarterly dividend payments rather than annual payments. We want our enterprises to employ our people, be profitable, pay their Navajo Nation loans and make revenue deliveries to the Nation.

The Navajo Nation has always been an energy Nation. The era of coal and power plants is nearing an end but energy production will always be important on our land.

One of the most important actions I've taken as President is signing Executive Order 02-2023.

This order requires energy companies with a proposal for the Navajo Nation to submit its plan to the Division of Natural Resources.

Most importantly, it creates an "Initial Vetting Team" to screen energy proposals to ensure they are viable and warrant continued action.

At the moment, a steady stream of proposals is flowing in to us. I'm pleased that the energy industry is thankful we've undertaken this process to have their proposals heard.

If a proposal looks good, the Initial Vetting Team will proceed to due diligence, contact potentially affected chapters, refer the proposal to the right Navajo department and to one of its energy enterprises for further consideration.

With 2,100 Navajo Nation job vacancies, I will need your help to fund additional positions in the Division of Public Safety Information Management System and the Department of Personnel Management. This is to complete required background checks for hundreds of eager and educated job applicants.

I recommend two changes.

The first is to permit new staff to be hired and placed into their positions while their background checks are being completed.

My second recommendation is to change who is required to have a comprehensive background check as everyone is now, requiring them for critical positions only.

In the meantime, I recommend the Navajo Nation hire an outside firm to help complete the current large backlog of background checks.

To improve the hiring process, the Division of Human Resources needs to purchase a new "Human Resources Management System."

Our current systems and software are outdated. Only with the right technical tools will we be able to fill vacancies in a timely way.

Divisions, departments and programs often know who is qualified to hire and ask them to apply. Many of these applicants can't be hired because some Department of Personnel Management requirements often eliminate candidates who may have done the same job before, may have the needed experience, but lack the required educational background now listed on an application.

That means specific people who are sought by departments don't get a job, and the job vacancies remain unfilled.

Often applicants are eliminated by our personnel staff who are following policies but are unfamiliar with the job in a department.

We need improved communication between departments needing people and the personnel staff hiring the applicants. These policy changes will need your approval. I welcome legislation, and I will sign it into law.

When we came into office, we learned there was \$4.2 million in danger of being reverted from Navajo Nation Workforce Development Program back to the U.S. Department of Labor. We were able to save this by getting the Navajo Nation Washington Office, Division of Human Resources, our Workforce Development Program and my staff to create a corrective action plan.

We were fortunate that the Department approved an extension until the end of December.

It took decades to create many of the barriers within our government that now hinder our Nation's progress. This is just a summary of our efforts so far.

We are simultaneously taking another path to create the needed roadmap that will take us into the future we want.

Early this month, I appointed Mr. Arvin Trujillo as Navajo Nation Executive Administrator to head the Executive Branch's strategic planning and implementation efforts.

Mr. Trujillo most recently served as CEO of Four Corners Economic Development. He is a former director of the Division of Natural Resources.

He has already facilitated 10 sessions to begin training each of our division directors to create a Navajo Nation Strategic Plan with specific goals.

The goal areas are: economic, educational, community safety, government efficiency, continuous building of infrastructure, wise use of natural resources, protection of the environment, woven together with a vision of connecting the beauty of our past Navajo culture to the emerging Navajo culture of the future.

Because we are facing a housing crisis here in Window Rock and all across the Navajo Nation, we began our strategic planning sessions to coordinate our initiative to build 1,000 new homes.

This plan is ambitious. It will involve partnerships among government, enterprises, schools and private entities.

It seeks to increase home ownership, rental units, home improvement programs and housing education. We are collecting data now and moving as quickly as we can.

The first work group reported more than 1,400 applications from Navajo housing-related programs and enterprises. My office will hold a housing summit this summer that will include the public. I hope for your participation.

Policy reform will be a large part of this. That will require your help through legislation. Strategic planning is not a quick fix. It's a process that produces results that are measurable. Through strategic planning, we will have data to know where we are and where we are headed.

Getting water to our Nation and water to our people's homes is critical. On March 22, the Biden Administration awarded another \$67 million construction contract to continue building the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project's San Juan Lateral which is now 50% complete.

The San Juan Lateral will convey water for treatment and delivery to the downstream Navajo communities and to Gallup. When completed, the Navajo-Gallup Project will support 250,000 people with water for a 40-year period.

Council is aware that we will be heading back to Congress to seek additional appropriations to complete the San Juan Lateral. We are confident Congress will respond favorably and act quickly as possible.

Last month many of you listened to the U.S. Supreme Court session to hear our arguments in cases of Arizona v. Navajo Nation and Department of the Interior v. Navajo Nation.

Both of these cases involve our claim that the federal government has an obligation to protect our water rights to Colorado River water. A decision is expected sometime this summer.

One week from today, on April 24, the Navajo Nation will be in court again. This time in the adjudication of the Little Colorado River System. This case began in 1978 to determine conflicting water rights in the basin.

There are competing claims to the water by the Navajo Nation, the Hopi Tribe, and numerous other parties.

Attorney General Branch has invited you all to attend and, if it is possible, I encourage you to attend.

But we want to be strategic and not leave everything in the hands of the court. On Saturday I met with the Naabik'iyati' Committee and we stand united in securing as much water as possible in LCR.

We agreed that we need a Negotiation Settlement Team to move settlement negotiations forward. The Water Rights Commission will appoint this team by the end of the month.

I am confident, Council, that we together will stand united behind that team in our collective effort to bring as much water home to our people as possible. This is vital to us building a strong and vibrant homeland for our young people.

Lastly, I would like to thank our interim Controller Elizabeth Begay for her years of service to the Navajo Nation. Elizabeth, we all wish you the very best on your new retirement adventure.

I am also very pleased to announce and welcome to the Office of the Controller Mr. Sean McCabe as our new interim Navajo Nation controller.

I am confident you'll find him completely qualified for confirmation.

There are complexities and much diversity throughout our Nation. We have a team in place who are dedicated to finding solutions and moving our Nation forward.

Let's continue to remain united to empower the Navajo people.

Have a successful spring session. *Ahe'hee* doo thank you very much.



# CONTACT THE PRESIDENT

