



Navajo Nation clean water infrastructure needs exceed \$700 million

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The Naabik'iyáti' Committee of the 24th Navajo Nation Council heard from programs and utilities Friday, May 22 on the water infrastructure needs aimed at providing clean, piped water to the Navajo People. The Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources, Navajo Tribal Utility Authority (NTUA) and the Indian Health Service (IHS) Navajo Area Office reported together to the 24-member Committee that a total of more than \$700 million is needed to address the widespread lack of water and electricity access across the Navajo Nation.

“Out of the \$8 billion allocated to all tribes through the federal CARES Act, the Navajo Nation received more than \$600 million in the first round of distributions,” said Speaker Seth Damon. “The Navajo Nation Council has been working everyday since we received notice to ensure the immediate needs of all Navajo people are reflected in our first expenditure plans.” Speaker Damon also continued to encourage President Jonathan Nez to sign the Navajo Nation CARES Fund Act into law. That resolution, CMY-44-20, was approved by the Navajo Nation Council on May 15.

The discussion also included reports on the Western Pipeline Project and other regional projects, like the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project, the Cutter Lateral and more. These regional projects represent the bulk of the main infrastructure that will enable water access in Navajo communities.

Jason John, manager for the Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources, discussed multiple water projects totaling an estimated \$714,887,000. These projects are intended to deliver clean, piped water to Navajo homes and include necessary infrastructure to support expanded water access. The projects included:

- \$15 million in immediate utility customer assistance
- \$334,550,000 for water and electricity to Navajo homes
- \$34 million for support for existing water hauling operations
- \$54,737,000 to create connections to the Navajo Gallup Water Supply Project
- \$87.6 million for regional water infrastructure
- \$3 million for livestock windmills
- \$30 million subsidy for initial operation and maintenance costs
- \$80 million for NTUA loan to grant conversions
- \$20 million for infrastructure access and other roads
- \$30 million for sewage infrastructure
- \$5 million estimated for well infrastructure
- \$20 million estimated for agriculture
- \$1 million estimated for long-range planning

Nearly half of public comments received on the Navajo Nation CARES Fund Act approved by the Navajo Nation Council on May 15 supported expending federal CARES funding on water projects and infrastructure. The discussions held by the Navajo Nation Council and partner agencies have centered around access to clean, potable water for residential and agricultural use as a main challenge in promoting public health.

John stated that the Navajo Nation has long waited for the federal government to fulfill obligations to provide for the healthcare of the Navajo People, which was established through the signing of the Treaty of 1868. In his presentation, John explained that Navajo leaders made the decision in the 23rd Navajo Nation Council to begin utilizing the Nation's own funding to design, build and construct water projects. The resulting fund, called the Sihásin Fund, would help finance critical water infrastructure projects on the Navajo Nation over a 5-year period. The Sihásin Fund was established using a \$544 million settlement between the Navajo Nation and the federal government over claims of tribal trust accounting and mismanagement by the Department of the Interior.

The only solution to the Navajo Nation's inability to expend CARES Act funding for water infrastructure by Dec. 30, stated John, would be through memorandums of agreement (MOAs) with Navajo Nation enterprises. The Nation has utilized MOAs before to pre-pay for projects with streamlined development costs, which are more cost effective than outside contracting. However, said John, to complete any water infrastructure project, with the necessary land survey, cultural/archaeological and biological clearances in place, would normally take 3-4 years.

"It would be virtually impossible," said John. Council delegates pressed the presenters on projects with immediate impacts in Navajo communities. These projects included proposals to conduct well-drilling and testing, in addition to addressing the need for agricultural water for farming and livestock. Delegates discussed the public health impacts facing the Navajo Nation due to the lengthy travel required for basic goods and services.

Koontz emphasized the long-term economic viability and sustainability of water projects taken on by the NTUA. With the MOAs and the ongoing preparation by partners, like the Navajo Engineering and Construction Authority, expanding the capacity for design and build phases of water projects can begin within a few months. However, the operation and maintenance of completed projects will require initial subsidies as the Navajo Nation waits for more customers to begin paying for water use.

Council delegates also posed questions to the presenters relating to the Navajo workforce, the potential for partnering with federal construction agencies like the Army Corps of Engineers, paying for water storage, and more. The more than six-hour long discussion also included an overview of partnership on groundwater filtration systems under development on the Navajo Nation with the University of Arizona.

The work session on water infrastructure was the second in a series of work sessions by the 24-member Naabik'iyáti' Committee of the Navajo Nation Council. The discussion was followed on Tuesday with discussions on economic development and small businesses as part of the development of one or more expenditure plans relating to federal CARES Act funding.

Additionally, a followup discussion is scheduled to take place with the Department of Water Resources on Thursday, May 28 following the scheduled work session on public safety, judicial and broadband needs.

A recording of the entire meeting can be accessed online at www.youtube.com/navajonationcouncil.

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