



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

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Navajo Nation Opposes Withdrawal for Development at Chaco Canyon, Tribal Consultation Ignored

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PHOTO: Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council gathered outside the Navajo Nation Council Chambers.

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — The 24th Navajo Nation Council reaffirmed its opposition to the Biden Administration proposal of a 20-year ban on oil and gas drilling within a 10-mile radius of the Chaco Culture Heritage Withdrawal Area in northwestern New Mexico.

President Biden announced the plan during the first day of the White House Tribal Nations Summit in Washington, D.C. The Interior Department plans for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to initiate consideration of this 20-year withdrawal of federal lands around the Chaco Culture National Historical Park in the coming weeks.

“The Biden Administration bypassed previous requests to Congress for field hearings and for leaders to hear directly from our Navajo families affected in the Chaco Canyon region. The position of the Navajo Nation Council is for the creation of a 5-mile buffer within and around this sacred site. It is important that the federal government consider and work with our Navajo allottees to further advance development. The Administration must respect our tribal sovereignty and what the government to government relationship entails,” said Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh).

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The BLM intends to publish a notice in the Federal Register that will commence a two-year segregation while an environmental analysis is completed and public comment on the proposed administrative withdrawal is provided.

“Protecting the interests of the Navajo people in the Eastern Agency is vital to our roles as the governing of the Navajo Nation. We must ensure the livelihood of Navajo allotted land owners in the greater Chaco Canyon area are maintained. The Navajo Nation through a resolution has provided a compromise to also protect this sacred area from mineral development. The Biden Administration has to work with us to find a solution that meets our needs and that is this 5-mile buffer zone,” said Resources and Development Committee Chair Rickie Nez (T’iistsoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tsé Daa K’aan, Newcomb, San Juan).

According to the Interior Department, the segregation and potential withdrawal would not affect existing valid leases or rights and would not apply to minerals owned by private, State, or Tribal entities.

“The Interior Department unilaterally made this withdrawal proposal without proper tribal consultation, now directly affecting our families on the Navajo Nation. The BLM now wants to initiate formal tribal consultation after the fact. The Navajo Nation Council has requested multiple times for Congressional leadership to hold hearings in the affected areas of New Mexico, which has yet to be completed. Our families from the allotted land areas are ignored and they deserve very opportunity to be heard now.” said Council Delegate Mark Freeland (Becenti, Lake Valley, Náhodishgish, Standing Rock, Whiterock, Huerfano, Nageezi, Crownpoint).

In January 2020, the Naabik’iyáti’ Committee of the 24th Navajo Nation Council unanimously 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.

“There are numerous Navajo cultural resource sites across the eastern portion of the Navajo Nation where Navajo allottees will be impacted. Congress commissioned a cultural resource investigation to be performed by cultural experts within the Chaco Canyon region that is still ongoing. The Biden Administration must wait until study results are completed before initiating this 20-year withdrawal. It is through our nation to nation relationship that our sovereignty is inherently important and should be respected at all costs,” said Budget and Finance Chairman Jamie Henio (Alamo, Ramah, Tóhajiilee).

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