



The 24TH NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL
Office of the Speaker

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Navajo Nation Council hosts Community Meeting on Helium Development Agreements in the Northern Agency

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PHOTO: Speaker Seth Damon, members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council and Navajo Nation Oil and Gas host outdoor meeting to hear from community members in Sanostee, N.M. regarding helium development.

SANOSTEE, N.M. — On Sunday, Speaker Seth Damon and members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council were joined by Navajo Nation Oil and Gas (NOOG) Chief Executive Officer, James McClure, and Board Chairman Lennard Eltsosie for a community meeting to hear from local leaders, elders, medicine people, and grazing permit holders regarding potential helium development in Sanostee, NM.

During the Winter Session this week, the Navajo Nation Council is considering Legislation No. 0232-21 sponsored by Speaker Seth Damon that would approve oil and gas operating agreements between the Navajo Nation and NNOG for the Tohatchi Wash, Blue Gap Mountain, and Porcupine Dome in the northern agency.

“We appreciate the community of Tsé’ Ałnáoozt’í’i and Honorable Amber Kanazbah Crotty for inviting us to hear directly from the Navajo people. The development of helium in this region has the potential to bring annual royalty revenue and create jobs. This includes thousands of dollars in new scholarship funds for our students and potential revenue for chapters. Sanostee Chapter and the Northern Agency can expect new economic development opportunities with improved support services. This legislation is a necessary investment into the future for the next seven generations,” said Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh).

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Around 100 community members joined Resources and Development Committee Chairman Rickie Nez, Madame Chair Eugenia Charles-Newton, Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty, Council Delegate Elmer Begay, and Speaker Damon in front of the Sanostee Veterans Center.

“Navajo Nation Oil and Gas has hosted several meetings with communities across the northern agency regarding the development of underground helium. It is clear we have to update the 2013 energy policy for the Navajo Nation that will guide us into the future. Many of our families in the area are still dealing with the trauma of uranium mining, so there are always concerns about any type of natural resource extraction. There needs to be further conversations on the possible health impacts of mining for helium. This legislation approving an operating agreement needs to be modified to benefit the impacted community and not Window Rock. We appreciate the leadership of Speaker Damon for listening to the people,” said Council Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty (Cove, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Red Valley, Tsé’ahnáoozt’í’í, Sheep Springs, Beclabito, Gad’ii’áhí/Tó Ko’i).

According to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), helium is a non-renewable natural resource that is commonly recovered from natural gas deposits by drilling. There are several benefits to the extraction of helium that assists the medical field by cooling essential diagnostic equipment such as MRI machines, for rocket engine testing, to detect gas leaks, and for space science research.

“We have to understand that helium is safe and not a fossil fuel. It does not have a carbon footprint that would impact climate change. Plus the mining for helium is already happening here in Sanostee and across northern New Mexico. Navajo Nation Oil and Gas will be drilling within a foot radius, a mile deep into the ground, just like how we also drill 1,000 feet to access water wells. This would benefit the Navajo people and the communities in the project area. All electronics, cars, and trucks take energy to power from fossil fuels. There needs to be a balance so we can pursue helium development to create jobs and develop our infrastructure during this pandemic,” said Council Delegate Elmer Begay (Dilcon, Indian Wells, Teesto, Whitecone, Greasewood Springs).

NNOG Chief Executive Officer, James McClure, shared that the search for helium is the same as drilling for clean water. There are 40 opportunities around the Navajo Nation for helium extraction that potentially could bring over a billion dollars in new revenue. \$1.7 million in royalties based on sales could also go to chapters in the region for local economic development initiatives and youth scholarships.

“We are seriously considering this legislation and have made it a priority to listen directly to the people. We all drove here by car or truck today that omits fossil fuel. What other options do the Navajo people have without trucks to haul wood and livestock, or cars to take us to local towns for groceries and other essential items. There must be some understanding between those who are against this and those in favor of helium extraction. It is a safe process that will yield significant revenue for the Navajo people. It is my belief that K’é should be the catalyst to bring us together during these difficult times,” added Chairman Rickie Nez (T’iistsoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tsé Daa K’aan, Newcomb, San Juan).

The operating agreement provides a primary term of 10 years for helium exploration and a secondary term for production should helium be discovered. NNOG must protect all Navajo water resources and obtain necessary permits for seismic testing, drilling, and for any ground disturbances including the construction of pipelines.

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