



State of the Navajo Nation

Winter Session, January 22, 2018

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Ya'at'eeh Shí K'é do Shí Diné'

Vice President Jonathan Nez and I are thankful to be here before the Honorable Speaker LoRenzo Bates and the 23rd Navajo Nation Council's 2018 Winter Session. We welcome all those who traveled to be here with us today and acknowledge all the special guests and dignitaries in the gallery.

The winter months are a time to pass along cultural stories from our elders to our youth. With the season also comes preparation for the Spring and Summer months. In looking forward, the Navajo Nation needs to assess its resources and analyze strategies to protect our rights while building our communities.

The federal government is addressing shutdown after Congress failed to pass a continuing funding resolution. Native Americans are disproportionately impacted by a federal shutdown. Our children attend federal schools and our people are treated in federal hospitals. Many of our members are employed by the federal government.

The Nation was just notified that the Senate passed a three-week continuing resolution and it will move forward to a vote in the House today.

More than half of Bureau of Indian Affairs would have been furloughed in the shutdown. In preparation, the Nation put contingency plans in place to ensure that critical programs like law enforcement that protect human life and federal property continued operating. More than 90 percent of Indian Health Service staff have remained at work, and Bureau of Indian Education schools are open. We continue to advocate for a balanced budget, and one that includes funding of some of our most critical programs, including Head Start and the Special Diabetes Program for Indians.

We have spent much energy testifying before Congress and advocating for water rights, preservation of sacred lands, and continued funding for health and education programs. Just last week

I attended the Secretary's Tribal Advocacy Committee meeting at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, where I pushed for reauthorization of the Special Diabetes Program for Indians. I also advocated for help recruiting and retaining medical professionals, better access to dental, behavioral and substance abuse care, and waivers that would remove work requirements for those seeking Medicaid coverage. Many of our people are self-employed, earning money by hauling water or chopping wood or selling jewelry. The state does not recognize this as employment, so we are pushing for waivers that would allow our hard-working people to qualify for health insurance.

The Nation has much to look forward to this year, as 2018 marks 150 years since our ancestors signed the Treaty of 1868 and returned home from Bosque Redondo. This is not a year of celebration, but a time of solemn recognition, a commemoration of the hardships our ancestors endured and the resiliency they brought back to our homeland.

In June, we will welcome the treaty for display at the Navajo Nation Museum, marking the first time since our leaders signed it in Hwéeldi that our document has been to our nation's capital. We encourage everyone to view the document and to respectfully honor our forebearers.

All three branches of the Navajo Nation government have come together to develop events in recognition of the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of 1868. It's an important time to teach our children about our ancestors, their hardships and their will to never give up. Our goal in commemorating the 150th anniversary is to remind our people that we have the strength and determination to never give up. We need to look at our hardships as stepping stones for a better tomorrow.

When our ancestors returned home from forced exile, our original homelands had been drastically reduced in size by foreign settlers and the federal

government. Today, the federal government continues to dispossess us of our lands, as evidenced by the recent proposed reduction of Bears Ears National Monument. But our ancestors did not despair and neither will we. The Navajo Nation is not the largest tribe in the world by accident. Leaders of the past made conscious efforts to expand our borders, nearly tripling the size of our reservation to more than 17 million acres. Today I promise that together we will continue to fight to regain every last acre of our rightful homelands. We, as Navajo, Diné people, have persevered and remained strong over the past 150 years. I know we will continue to persevere, grow, and flourish in the coming 150 years.

We are working to protect and preserve our current resources, while also increasing our land base. This month, I was in Washington to urge Congress to strike down a bill that would cut 85 percent from the Bears Ears National Monument. President Barack Obama's designation of that site was a victory for us and other local tribes. That monument encompasses tens of thousands of sacred, religious and cultural sites. This was not just a reduction—it was a destruction.

Meanwhile, in the past year and with the help of Honorable Delegate Dwight Witherspoon and Honorable Delegate Steven Begay, we acquired approximately 30,000 acres of land in the shadows of Tsisnaasjini', one of our four sacred mountains. With the purchase of the Wolf Springs and Boyer ranches, the Navajo Nation now extends into Colorado to reclaim our ancestral homelands.

With the purchase of the Wolf Springs Ranch, the Navajo Nation for the first time is owner of more than 900 head of bison. The Nation has recently vaccinated all bison and all cattle have been moved to Boyer Ranch. Navajo Nation divisions are currently formulating feasibility studies for the best use of the Ma'itsoh Bito'. In March 2018, the Department of Health will develop plans for traditional use of the property and will construct hogans at the ranch properties.

Through negotiations with the New Mexico State Land Commissioner, we agreed on a land ex-

change to return more than 37,000 acres back to Navajo along the eastern borders of our nation. Much of this land provided little value to the state but contributed to the checkerboard region that obstructed the development of infrastructure and economic growth. We thank the state of New Mexico and Honorable Delegate Leonard Tsosie and Honorable Delegate Benjamin L. Bennett for supporting this effort.

Support for veterans remains one of our top priorities—and one of the four pillars of this administration. We continue to meet regularly with the Veteran's Advisory Council and have completed the 1st housing policies and procedures for Veterans housing and the Housing Action Plan that will allow for funds to be released so we can start building homes. We need your support for these policies and plan so we can start building homes. We are committed to build 200 new homes for our veterans, with special priority given to women. Veterans are a special group with unique needs, and they are also heroes, people willing to give their lives for something bigger than themselves.

Our heroes volunteered not only to protect Navajo freedoms, but to protect the freedom of all Americans. We ask the federal government to continue to provide them the respect and support they deserve. When the Navajo Nation stands up and takes action to assist its veterans here at home, we do not diminish the responsibility of the federal government, which sent our children and grandchildren into harm's way. Instead, we are providing additional funding to programs for the men and women that fought for this country.

The Navajo Nation will continue to fight for the completion of promises made to Navajo relocatees. Our people were promised quality homes in places with infrastructure, roads, community centers and opportunities for economic development. These promises have not been kept and we will stand by our relocatees and fight any premature shutdown of the Office of Navajo Hopi Indian Relocation. ONHIR must not and cannot shutdown before these promises are kept. The ONHIR Transition team continues to meet on a monthly basis with ONHIR and BIA to ensure any premature

shutdown will not negatively impact our people. We are happy to work with the Navajo Hopi Land Commission and Honorable Delegate Walter Phelps, Honorable Delegate Raymond Smith and Honorable Delegate Dwight Witherspoon on this very important issue.

The youth are another priority. I would like to thank the Honorable Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty and Honorable Delegate Jonathan Hale because, on January 12, we officially opened the doors to Navajo students at the University of New Mexico's Rainforest Lobo dormitory. Through an agreement with UNM, 118 Navajo students can live on the fifth and sixth floors of the brand-new building, which is located in the innovation district of downtown Albuquerque and also houses office space for some of the leading technological and entrepreneurial industries. As of today, 23 students are housed in the Rainforest building and more applications have been received.

With support from the public and the Council, we are pursuing future initiatives to acquire dorm space for students at Arizona State University, the University of Arizona, San Juan College, Northern Arizona University and elsewhere. Just last week we completed negotiations on an agreement for Fort Lewis College to purchase an apartment complex for student housing in Durango and we need your support to acquire it. We would like to thank Honorable Delegate Seth Damon for his support for the Durango Hillcrest Apartment Complex.

Today, college tuition is far more expensive than it was for any of us here in this room. To match the price of rising tuition and support our students financially, to ensure that our children are not shackled by tens of thousands of dollars in debt, to allow them opportunities to save for their children and for their grandchildren, we ask for your support.

We also appreciate the support for my administration's initiatives to collaborate with regional universities through MOUs promoting educational opportunities for Navajo students. With Diné College and Western New Mexico University, we signed an agreement supporting the develop-

ment of Special Education teachers on the Navajo Nation. We are also providing 100 scholarships at Navajo Technical University for students in Navajo language classes. In addition, I signed seven MOUs with Arizona College, San Juan College, Utah State University, Refrigeration School Incorporated and more to provide occupational skills training for our employees here on the Navajo Nation.

Another area of growth is the Former Bennett Freeze area. Since President Obama lifted the freeze in 2009, the Nation has been working to rehabilitate a region that enmeshed by federal policy that made it illegal for families to mend broken corrals, build and renovate homes, and for communities to push for development of waterlines, powerlines and roads. Today we are developing infrastructure on the Former Bennett Freeze Area with the construction of 36 new homes, renovation of 45 homes and assistance with 54 home site leases. What is being done now in the FBFA cannot alone mend the injustice of nearly four decades of damaging, paternalistic policy. There is no overnight fix, but together we can work toward a more collaborative approach.

As you know, our administration continues to move forward with the creation of the first Managed Care Organization owned by Native Americans. Millions of our dollars every year go to non-Native healthcare organizations. With an MCO, which we hope to launch by January 1, 2019, we can take control of our own healthcare system and address the unique needs of the Navajo people. This will be unprecedented in Indian Country. It will increase our ability to provide services to our people, and also increase the quality of interactions between patients and their healthcare providers. The MCO will create opportunities for Navajo physicians to return home and help establish our own healthcare system.

Another important health issue affecting our people is the prevalence of sexual assault and other crimes committed against our people, and especially against our children and youth. In December, we signed a contract to purchase mass notification software that will allow us to send out our own AMBER Alerts. This software allows

the Nation to issue notifications in any emergency, whether it's manmade, natural or regarding hazardous material. We are now the first tribe to have our own alert system operating in eleven counties and three states. Now, in the case of a child abduction, we can alert the whole Nation and make sure the child is recovered quickly. We are also working with Congress to pass a federal bill that would give tribes access to federal AMBER Alert grants. I want to thank Executive Director of Navajo Division of Public Safety Jesse Delmar and his staff and also Honorable Delegate Amber Crotty for their advocacy.

While we support the advancement of technology and its positive impacts on our communities, we also must support protections against any form of cyberbullying or use of electronic communication to intimidate or harass. The Office of the President and Vice President has worked with the departments of Health, Education and Social Services, and with Honorable Delegate Nathaniel Brown to address cyberbullying legislation, which will be entertained in this Winter Session. We ask for your support on this important legislation.

Further efforts to promote public safety and address violence, substance use and suicide will become part of the Diné Action Plan. Such a plan has not been updated in nearly 30 years, so Chief Justice Allen Sloan and I issued a memorandum directing executive and judicial employees to develop one together. With approval of the Council, the Diné Action Plan will merit tribal employees with the credibility needed to streamline the bureaucratic process and secure federal funding.

To provide security for our people for the next 150 years, we need to create the conditions for


a long-lasting Navajo Nation. Part of this is anticipating hardship, such as drought, so we established a task force to address this issue. We are also pleased to announce that the nation has received over \$17 million in drought insurance.

We'd also like to shed light on volunteer efforts. This past Christmas, executive staff delivered community bags and firewood, and delegates gave away Christmas turkeys to those in need in all five agencies. The Navajo Nation Christian Response Team raised money to travel to Houston and then to Florida to help those whose lives were devastated by hurricanes. Tribal members volunteered their time to promote events for the community, healthier lifestyles and active living. They organized food drives and braved the cold to lend a helping hand.


In preparation for Spring, let's continue to lead healthier lifestyles. As we feel the effects of tightened federal funding, let's maintain stringent finances, stretch our dollars further and recirculate our money into local economies. It's important to support local businesses and entrepreneurs. This strengthens our economy and our Nation.

We are proud of our Nation's growth and strength 150 years after our greatest challenge in Hwéeldi. Now it is up to us to continue this growth and build upon our strength as a nation for the next 150 years. Together, we can and we will continue to grow our communities, our land, our people, and keep our culture strong for our next generations. We are Diné—we always have been and we always will be here.

God bless you all and God bless the Navajo Nation.


Russell Begaye, *President*
THE NAVAJO NATION




Jonathan Nez, *Vice President*
THE NAVAJO NATION