



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Navajo Nation opposes proposed Utah Public Lands Initiative Act



Photo: Council Delegate Davis Filfred met with students from Colorado Mesa University, who support and advocate for the national monument designation of Bears Ears, San Juan County, Utah. (Oct. 15, 2016)

BLANDING, Utah – Last Thursday, the Navajo Nation Council’s Naabik’íyáti’ Committee approved Legislation No. 0364-16, which establishes the Nation’s official opposition to U.S. House Resolution 5780, an initiative that would “provide greater certainty and local management of federal lands use in Utah,” particularly the Bears Ears area in San Juan County, Utah. The proposed bill is sponsored by U.S. Rep. Rob Bishop (R – UT, 1st District).

According to legislation sponsor Council Delegate Davis Filfred (Mexican Water, Aneth, Teecnospos, Tólikan, Red Mesa), the UPLI Act is a pro-development bill “disguised” as a land conservation effort that references the McCracken Mesa Mineral Transfer located on the Navajo Nation, and amends the Utah Navajo Trust Fund by changing the percentage of allocation to the Utah area.

“It is important that the Navajo Nation oppose this bill because the state of Utah and the federal government failed to consult with our Nation in regards to changes to our UNTF and mineral royalties,” said Delegate Filfred. “The change to the UNTF should have been a stand-alone bill and not hidden within H.R. 5780.”

Delegate Filfred said that the bill impedes on Navajo Nation sovereignty, and that the state of Utah only serves as the trustee of the UNTF and does not have the authority to make any changes to the trust fund without consulting and receiving authorization from the Navajo government.

Naabik’íyáti’ Committee members voted 13-0 to approve the legislation, and serves as the final authority on the bill. The resolution opposing H.R. 5780 will be conveyed to the U.S. Congressional members and President Obama through the advocacy of the Navajo Nation Council.

On Saturday, college students from Colorado Mesa University’s Sustainability Council and Latino Student Alliance invited Delegate Filfred to participate in a discussion regarding the proposed Utah PLI legislation, as well as to explain the cultural and historical significance of the Bears Ears area in relation to the Navajo people. The group gathered at Bears Ears, which is located approximately 40-miles east of Blanding.

Delegate Filfred explained that the Bears Ears area is the birthplace of prominent Navajo leaders such as Chief Manuelito and his brother K’ayelii, and the landscape serves as the hub of many traditional Navajo medicines, historical artifacts, burial sites, stories, and the creation of some of the original Diné clans that thrive in today’s Navajo societies.

“U.S Rep. Bishop does not understand the Navajo Nation’s ties to the Bears Ears area or our need to protect the landscape. His proposed legislation seeks to impede on our inherent rights to our ancestral land areas, and we will continue to fight this bill for the Diné,” said Delegate Filfred. “I truly appreciate the involvement and advocacy of the CMU students, who recognize the need to designate Bears Ears as a national monument.”

He added that the proposed Utah PLI bill would allow mining of natural resources in the Bears Ears area, which could potentially devastate sacred sites, burial grounds, allow access to sites that could be vandalized, or eroded by recreational sports utility vehicles.

CMU student Gabriel Otero said their organization would continue to advocate for the national monument designation and expressed gratitude for Delegate Filfred’s traditional knowledge and explanation regarding the significance of Bears Ears.

“[We] care deeply about the U.S. southwest and want to preserve the natural beauty, including protecting Native Americans lands,” said Otero.

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