



# STATE OF THE NATION

PRESIDENT BUU NYGREN  
VICE PRESIDENT RICHELLE MONTOYA



25<sup>TH</sup> NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL

*Summer Session 2024*



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PRESIDENT BUU NYGREN

JULY 15, 2024

Madam Speaker Crystalyne Curley, Madam Chief Justice JoAnn Jayne, Madam Vice President Richelle Montoya, members of the 25th Navajo Nation Council, visiting dignitaries and guests, my Navajo people, *Yá'át'ée'eh!*

Since the 1960s, there have been four Navajo chairmen, nine Navajo presidents and 15 administrations before ours. Ever since Raymond Nakai was chairman, each administration tried to gain water rights to access Colorado River water for our People. It couldn't be done.

Since 2012, when another settlement was unsuccessful before the Navajo and Hopi Councils, every Navajo administration since then tried to bring the parties back to the negotiating table to revive a settlement but failed.

Today, we can celebrate the success of a new agreement among three tribes and look for its authorization by the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives by the end of 2024. Few accomplishments compare in magnitude to the Northeastern Arizona Indian Water Rights Settlement Agreement that was accomplished by our Legislative and Executive branches working together. From our meeting at Twin Arrows last year to the signing of our legislation in May, this is a singular achievement that will benefit so many of our People for so long.

After 15 months of intense work, we have many people to thank for this historic achievement. From the Legislative Branch, I want to acknowledge Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley, Navajo Nation Council Delegates Casey Allen Johnson, Helena Nez Begay, Brenda Jesus, Cherilyn Yazzie, Otto Tso, Vince James, Carl Slater, Shawna Claw, Germaine Simonson and Herman Daniels.



From our Department of Justice Water Rights Unit, thank you to Associate Attorney General Michelle Espino, attorney Mac Stant, contract attorney Louis Denetsosie, Consultant John Leeper and Principal Hydrologist Robert Kirk.

To the Navajo Nation Water Rights Commission Chairwoman Joelynn M. Ashley and its members, no previous commission has been composed of the expertise and experience your members brought to this incredible task. Thank you.

Two women that deserve special recognition. First, our own Madam Attorney General Ethel Branch. No one could have navigated the legal twists and turns of such a complex and comprehensive water rights settlement and guided her staff better. I envisioned this day when I asked her to be our Attorney General. Thank you, Madam AG.

No one does anything alone. We cannot achieve greatness without greatness behind us. My Chief Legal Counsel Bidtah Becker embodies greatness in every endeavor and every conversation. Bidtah kept the negotiations on track and moving steadily forward. Thank you, Bidtah. You have established yourself as a preeminent negotiator par excellence.

We will forever be grateful to these individuals for leaving a great legacy that will benefit our Navajo People for generations to come.

When this settlement is authorized by Congress, it will authorize \$5 billion in federal funding for seven major water projects and pipelines. It will allow the transfer of water from the Colorado River Upper Basin to the Lower Basin. That will allow us to bring water from the Navajo-Gallup Pipeline to Window Rock and other communities that need it.

Most importantly, it will bring substantial clean, safe and reliable drinking water to Navajo chapters across our land and will provide good jobs for years to come. Thousands of Navajo families will finally be able to have running water in their homes for the first time.

I have expressed my gratitude to the bipartisan representatives who brought our Arizona settlement before Congress. U.S. Senators Mark Kelly and Kyrsten Sinema, Congressmen Juan Ciscomani, Greg Stanton, David Schweikert, Raúl Grijalva and Eli Crane have accepted this challenge as sponsors. Their unity and support mean so much to the Navajo People and their efforts will never be forgotten. Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Council, when we work in unity and put our differences aside, we achieve historic things together. We have been able to accomplish two historic water rights settlements and save ARPA only 18 months into our terms.



These are the kind of accomplishments our People sent us here to do and expect from us. It is our duty to find solutions to problems our People face; to act in the best interest of our futures and our children's futures; and to make government more efficient.

Many of our people suffer and struggle every single day. All of our 110 communities need jobs, services, roads, homes and water. The People want the President and Council Delegates to be productive together, serving our chapters and constituents as we were elected to do.

My responsibility as President is to ensure all of the Executive Branch divisions and departments function as efficiently as possible. When I don't see progress, I exercise my discretion to make changes.

The responsibility of the Legislative Branch is to ensure our tribal policies and laws are up to date so our government is functional and meets the demands of today. It is also their duty to ensure that divisions and departments have the necessary budgets they need to directly serve our People.

Our Judicial Branch exists to resolve legal disputes. Over the next several months as we debate the budget, I encourage the Council to fund the Judicial Branch so it can address its longstanding and massive backlog of cases. It needs to be adequately funded to ensure it can recruit the number of qualified judges and fund the staff it needs. Our People need judicial recourse for their legal problems, and to receive the justice they deserve. An underfunded Judicial Branch hurts our Navajo People and weakens our sovereignty.

Our government operates by the rule of law. That includes a healthy separation of powers among the three branches. As a three-branch government, we have equal but different powers. When we act within our roles and authorities in the best interest of our people, our government thrives.

As Naat'aaniis, we owe each other a high degree of respect and k'é. When I invite you to my office for discussions, I treat you with respect and dignity. To the majority of you who treat me with an equal measure of respect when I come to these Chambers – the People's house – thank you. I enjoy coming here to talk about law and policy.

I campaigned on and came into office with high expectations of myself. I made that clear to each of you and to all of our constituents. My high expectations extend to everyone who works in the Executive Branch, whether they are within my office or divisions.



As a government, we have the capacity to bring systemic changes to our communities. Let's use the momentum of unity of our water rights negotiations as a framework to govern for the needs of our people. Teamwork will help us achieve my ambitious plans to build 1,000 homes, fill countless potholes, build bathrooms, reopen senior centers – this has helped us create the Revenue Replacement Reserve; now let's work together to develop a plan.

When changes need to be made in the Executive Branch, I am not afraid to make them. That is my responsibility as President. It is the People who gave that responsibility to me. My hope is that by working together in the future, as we have, the more you will come to trust in my decisions.

Each delegate can help their constituents by ensuring that we have the legislation to address the multitude of needs of our People. Council members, harmony is the greatest teaching and greatest value of the Navajo People. I commit myself to that end. Let's support one another in harmony to confront big challenges of poverty, illness, domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism and social problems that thousands of our People deal with every day.

Our role as Naa'taanis is not to undermine other elected leaders through personal or political attacks, negative framing, derogatory remarks, insults or questioning of competence in the media. That fails to move our government forward. Nothing is gained and it's not why we're here.

We are all relatives. We have no political parties that separate us as enemies. We are here to stand against despair and stand up for more safety, more employment, more education and more services for the People.

That is a nonpartisan issue. We are sovereign, and as sovereigns we share the responsibility of solving our people's problems. This is a time for unity as a People, not division as political rivals. Standing together brings us lasting benefit. Standing apart brings us lasting misery.

We are all the People's leaders. They look to us for leadership to make their lives and their children's lives better. With ARPA dollars, with our water rights settlement before Congress, with our plans to build roads, houses and give loans to small businesses, we have great opportunities. Leadership is born of unity. Discord is born of disunity and dysfunction.

Let's choose to be the leaders our ancestors and our constituents can be proud of. Let's rise above criticism and continue to work together as we have over the past 18 months.



With the blessings before us, let's show the People we have the initiative, innovation, creativity and inspiration to drive change together.

Let's influence others positively and inspire creative action. Let's build on the legacy of our ancestors – past, present and future.

Members of the Honorable 25th Navajo Nation Council, thank you very much. *Ahe'bee.*

### CONTACT THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

