



The Navajo Nation
Yideeskáądi Nitsáhákees

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Navajo President Buu Nygren says Navajo Wool & Mohair Buy was way to ‘honor our past, secure our future’

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – For the Navajo, the labor and love of raising sheep is a centuries-old tradition.

To many, *Diné* is synonymous with sheepherding. Mutton is a staple of the regional and cultural diet.

Navajos transform wool into rugs which are revered globally for their exquisite craftsmanship and unique patterns.

“A vibrant economy is one grounded in our cultural identity,” Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren said. “The vitality of our people and of our Nation rests in this truth. This part of our heritage is worth protecting and investing in.”

From an early age, *Diné* children are taught *Diné bi beenahaz’aanii* – Navajo fundamental law – regarding environmental stewardship and having respect for all living creatures, especially one’s livestock.

Each year, within the vast ancestral homelands between the Four Sacred Mountains, the Navajo migrate with their flocks in accordance with the changing seasons.



The Navajo Nation Wool & Mohair Buy last month lasted three days and was to stimulate the wool and mohair economy on the Navajo Nation.

Even today, it is common to hear that a family is moving their sheep to or from a winter camp or a summer camp.

Raising sheep is an art. It’s a partnership as complex as it is dynamic between a shepherd and his flock. Sheepherding is more akin to a dance of understanding and trust than an exercise in

dominance. To the Navajo, it is a symbiotic relationship dating back to the 16th century. For this reason, President Nygren, the Department of Agriculture and Diné College hosted the Navajo Nation Wool & Mohair Buy last month. The event lasted three days. Its purpose was to stimulate the wool and mohair economy on the Navajo Nation.



Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren said the vitality of the people and of the Navajo Nation rests in this the Navajo heritage, and is worth protecting and investing in.

Each day, Navajos from across the Nation formed a nearly one-mile-long line of cars, trucks and trailers. Loads varied in weight from 40 pounds to more than 1,000 pounds, one bag to truckloads – even trailers full of burlap bags. Eager to sell their wool, some producers waited for hours to have their product evaluated, sorted on skirting tables and weighed.

In total, the event brought together 641 producers. Collectively, nearly 150,000 pounds of wool and mohair was purchased.

To many participants, the event was a lifeline. OPVP, DOA and Diné College facilitators reported that many participants expressed frustration and concern for the wool and mohair market. On the Navajo Nation, COVID-19 caused a near complete collapse in the wool and mohair market.

“This event is a promise kept to our elder sheepherders,” President Nygren said. “They shared with me the importance of sustaining wool. Our sheep are sacred. They not only provide us with the food and clothing but a livelihood. Raising sheep is a way of life.”

Justina Slim, a Diné College livestock specialist, helped facilitate the event.

“Our goal is to develop a market,” she said. “A lot of our producers are having to trash their wool or resort to using it for erosion control. We want to create an incentive for our producers so that they can continue to produce wool for years to come.”

Navajo Dept. of Agriculture Director Jessie Jim said much of the wool arrived in big trash bags. Plastic bags don’t allow wool to breathe and may result in rotting. Wool traditionally has been stored in burlap bags. Now, she said, breathable mesh or plastic bags are available for their storage. Twice, the Navajo sheep industry was nearly eradicated. In the 1860s, Col. Kit Carson was ordered to slaughter Navajo livestock as part of the forced march to imprisonment known as the Long Walk. Navajo were released after four years.

In the 1930s, the U.S. government conducted a forced stock reduction program with the intention of preventing a dust bowl situation. It involved the selling and slaughtering of tens of thousands of sheep, goats, cows and horses to prevent overgrazing.

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, many sheep producers on Navajo received only a penny a pound for their wool, a stark contrast to the higher prices of the past.

The Navajo Nation Wool & Mohair Buy hopes to provide much needed support to producers to help stabilize and, potentially, revive the market.

Director Jim said she wanted to use the event as a teaching tool and to gather data on the breeds of sheep now being raised on the Navajo Nation.

“There are certain breeds of sheep used for meat production,” she said.

“Some are used specifically for their wool. It just depends on what you want to do with your herd.”



To the event facilitators, this was more than economics. It is a celebration of heritage and a step toward cultural revitalization.

“My administration is fixated on the future,” President Nygren said, “We are committed to create opportunities that honor our past and secure our future.

Together, we must ensure that the sacred traditions of *Diné* continue to thrive and that our people remain strong, even in the face of adversity.”

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