



The Navajo Nation **DR. BUU NYGREN** *PRESIDENT*

Yideeskáądi Nitsáhákees | *Think for the Future*

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Navajo President Buu Nygren says Remediation Fund, cleanup of sites, is solution to contamination at 40 commercial, industrial locations

NAVAJO, N.M. – The Navajo Nation will clean up chemical and petroleum contamination left behind for decades by businesses abandoned across the Nation, and one large tribal enterprise in this mountainous community.

It sets aside 2% of projected tribal revenues to be from the Nation's general fund. Based on Fiscal Year 2026's projected revenues, the Remediation Fund could grow about \$4.4 million annually.

On Thursday, Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren commended Navajo EPA Director Stephen Etsitty and Navajo Nation Council Delegate Andy Nez for their perseverance to usher the Navajo Environmental Remediation Fund into law.

"I remember when Dr. Nez and Stephen came to my office," he said. "They threw the number of \$500 million that's going to be needed for remediation. I'm glad that we recognized the problem and now they've come up with the solution."

The Navajo Nation Remediation Fund signed by the President here is a way to begin to build toward that goal, he said.



Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren traveled to Red Lake #18 Chapter to sign the Navajo Nation Environment Remediation Fund legislation into law. The fund will pay for remediation of abandoned Navajo business and industrial sites that left water and land contamination behind.

Across the Navajo Nation, some 40 abandoned industrial and commercial sites need environmental cleanup and remediation.

This includes closed trading posts, laundromats, gas stations and, most significantly, the abandoned

Navajo Forest Products Industries site in Navajo and Sawmill, N.M.

It is calculated that the 40 sites require upward of \$47.6 million in cleanup costs.

“This fund supports the clean-up of former businesses and industrial sites that sit empty or abandoned with contamination and pose a public health risk to

Dine people, to natural resources like groundwater, and to live-stock,” President Nygren said.

“We're looking at prior business site leases and how that land we still have we can be used beyond its initial business site application.”

– Navajo EPA Director Stephen Etsitty

NFPI was the first tribally owned enterprise. It was a sawmill and particle board manufacturing facility that was built in Sawmill in 1939 and moved to Navajo 1960.

“We're going to continue to work with the U.S. EPA and try to secure as many federal resources to bring to bear on these contamination issues as we've been doing over the decades,” said NEPA Director Etsitty.

“We have completed several site-specific assessments and characterization work,” he said. “This has led to some actions that involve removal of certain contaminants, most notably asbestos and petroleum contaminated soils across different segments of the NFPI site.”

Etsitty said there are high costs to the cleanup that NEPA has assessed so far.

“While this fund does not meet those estimated dollar amounts for the entirety, this is an important decision, and I would characterize it as an important investment as we have devised a method to prioritize these sites across the Nation,” he said.

When the land and sites are cleaned up, Etsitty said they'll be prime locations for redevelopment.

“We are starting to use the word ‘redevelopment’ more and more,” he said. “We're looking at prior business site leases and how that land we still have we can be used beyond its initial business site application.”

Etsitty said well-thought out and well-planned programs can bring these old sites back to a usefulness.

“Across our lands, that fulfills other needs in community locations for all manner of our society,

from our children to our elderly,” he said. “So the land can be redeveloped. What was there before that came out of the 20th century can be redeveloped.”

NFPI laid off its 300 workers and closed in 1994 from a combination of financial instability, environmental pressure, foreign competition, declining demand for timber products and poor management.

It left contaminated soil and groundwater behind after decades of operation and employment of thousands of Navajo workers through the years.

A 2021 assessment of soil borings at the NFPI site found chemicals such chromium, lead, diesel fuel, mercury, selenium benzene, naphthalene, toluene, formaldehyde and various other solvents detected in soil at high levels at differing depths, from ground surface to 25 feet.

Hexavalent chromium, a corrosion inhibitor that is a known carcinogen, was found at low levels in groundwater. Chromium, which is toxic, was present in every groundwater sample.

NFPI operated for eight years before there was a federal Environmental Protection Agency and 10

years before the establishment of the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Commission.

The many other sites in need of remediation poses risks to soil, groundwater, washes, vegetation, wildlife and human health.

The fund will create an ongoing source of money for long-term remediation projects, he said. It will help expedite clean-up instead of waiting for lawsuit settlements or relying on federal resources.

“With this legislation, we are thinking for the future and building a healthier future for our people,” the President said.

The Remediation Fund legislation calls for the Controller’s office to set up the fund by Oct. 7, 2025.

It will be used to pay NEPA's contractors to conduct environment assessments and perform the cleanup and remediation tasks at former businesses and industrial sites.

These are contaminated with dangerous chemicals, materials or substances that pose a danger to human health, public welfare, livestock, crops, groundwater, sacred plants and the natural environment.

“With this legislation, we are thinking for the future and building a healthier future for our people.”

– Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren

According to the fund legislation, there is extensive surface and groundwater contamination at several other former business and industrial sites across the Navajo Nation.

“We're at the threshold of a whole new wave of community and economic development,” Etsitty said. “We're hoping that by investing in this fund and supporting redevelopment, it continues to support us in those in those major projects that you're working on today that will probably come to light in the next five to 15 years.”

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