

THE NAVAJO NATION

JONATHAN NEZ | PRESIDENT MYRON LIZER | VICE PRESIDENT



Written Testimony of the Navajo Nation Vice President Myron Lizer

June 5, 2019

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 2181, the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act of 2019 Before the U.S House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

Good Morning Chairwoman Haaland, Ranking Member Young and members of the subcommittee, my name is Myron Lizer and I am the Vice President of the Navajo Nation. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 2181, the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act of 2019, to permanently protect the sacred Chaco landscape for our children and future generations whose culture and history is intimately connected to this special place.

As native people, we are connected to the land and it is important to preserve sacred landscapes. Chaco Canyon is a very special place – it is truly impressive with stone walls standing at least 30 feet into the sky, large round kivas in every great house, and thousands of artifacts dating back thousands of years - it is a splendor to see. It is also widely understood that the Chaco Canyon region was a special gathering place where many indigenous peoples and clans converged to trade and share goods, stories, ceremonies, traditions, and knowledge. Our people have long settled in the area and many of our traditional stories are connected to Chaco and the surrounding region. Aside from Chaco’s contributions to the field of archeology and history, this place is sacred and deserves permanent protection.

It is important that we continue to protect sacred sites and places like Chaco so indigenous people can continue to teach and share their history. Often times, our culture and stories are told through landscapes such as Chaco. The knowledge held by the land, structures, and artifacts need to live on for future generations. For many Tribes in the greater Chaco region, this place holds

great cultural significance. The Sun Dagger, ball courts, petroglyphs, great houses, and over 430,000 other artifacts have greatly informed our past and existence. We should all appreciate and honor the contributions of great societies, one of which is Chaco.

With any type of development, especially oil and gas, the risk for disturbances of any structures and artifacts that surround the development is always increased. Whether confirmed or not, our people living in this region talk about slight tremors that are increasing in frequency and they are concerned. Oil and gas development activities will also increase the amount of emissions such as particulate matter, methane, and volatile organic compounds which can also affect the surrounding environment but more important, affect our people living in the area along with their livestock. The Navajo Nation has an ugly history with uranium mining and its long-lasting effect on human life, our animals, and our environment. We cannot go through another environmental disaster if we can prevent it now.

Furthermore, with more than 90 percent of the public lands in Northwest New Mexico already leased for energy development, there should not be a need to lease more federal lands in the areas near the park.

Recently, on May 28, 2019, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez along with Pueblo tribal leaders and Senator Martin Heinrich, met with Secretary of Interior David Bernhardt at the Chaco Culture National Historic Park to discuss protection of the park from natural resource development. This was the first visit by Secretary Bernhardt to the park. Based on that visit, we understand that Secretary Bernhardt has agreed to hold off on issuing any new leases for natural resource extraction in the area for one year for the purpose of providing the Bureau of Land Management time to complete its updated resource management plan. We support the development of sustainable management so long as it prevents federal oil and gas extraction

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within the area designated in H.R. 2181 located in and around the Chaco Cultural National Historic Park. We applaud the Secretary's decision, however we also need a more permanent solution provided by H.R. 2181 and S. 1079.

H.R. 2181 would provide long-term protection for this critically important landscape filled with cultural objects and sacred sites, but it should not also act in lieu of BLM's responsibility to listen to our communities and protect these lands through the administrative process. Furthering the partnership between agencies and Indian tribes will help ensure that tribes will be consulted and that a scientific and archaeological analysis would be conducted to guarantee cultural sensitivity, even on leases that may have already been executed within the Chaco region.

President Nez and I also want to make clear that we oppose any talk of potential uranium mining in the area and we want to make sure that it cannot be developed. Uranium mining has been detrimental to the Navajo people and we want to make sure that it does not harm any families again. Navajo law also supports a moratorium on uranium mining, processing, and transportation activity on the Navajo Nation.

For the protection of the cultural and historic knowledge, public health and our environment, the Navajo Nation supports the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act sponsored by Congressman Ben Ray Luján as well as Senator Udall's companion Senate bill. The Greater Chaco Region is a living landscape, utilized by our ancestors and meant to be accessible for tribal communities to support the continuance of cultural practices vital to our present identity. The bill also protects the land, structures and environment from any unanticipated adverse effects associated with unchecked oil and gas development in the region.

I appreciate the invitation and the opportunity to testify before the committee. Ahéhee'.

Thank you.

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