

President Begaye signs historic land agreement

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Secures hundreds of thousands of acres in Eastern Navajo Agency

ALBUQUERQUE – President Russell Begaye joined New Mexico State Land Commissioner Aubrey Dunn Nov. 16 to close on a historic land exchange that solidifies hundreds of thousands of acres of checkerboard land within the Navajo Nation’s Eastern Agency.

For decades, Navajo people living in the Eastern Navajo Agency have faced unresolved obstacles when seeking rights of ways and accessing culturally significant State Trust Land.

“Lands in the Eastern Agency are checkerboard with private, county, state and allotted land, which makes it difficult to work on roads and to install power and water lines,” Begaye said. “This land exchange is historic. For all these years, our people have wanted to make their lands whole. Thank you to the New Mexico State Land Office for working with the Navajo Nation on this land exchange.”

The land exchange conveys to the Navajo Nation over 45,562 acres of State Trust Lands in Cibola, McKinley and San Juan counties in exchange for 41,804 acres of Navajo-owned land in Cibola and Socorro counties.

Through the exchange, Navajo people using State Trust Lands will be able to obtain much needed rights of ways for services such as water, electricity and gas once they obtain the proper leases from the Navajo Nation.

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The lands conveyed to the State of New Mexico as a part of the exchange will be leased back to the Nation for further utilization by local Navajo communities. The Navajo Nation also retained all the mineral and water rights on the lands it exchanged.

In 2016, the Office of the President became aware of an issue where a Navajo family was unknowingly burying their family members in a cemetery located on New Mexico State Trust Land. The State effectively stopped all funerals at the cemetery and residents faced trespassing in accessing the burial plot.

“When it became trespassing just to bury a family member, it became serious,” Begaye said. “This is initially how the land exchange began. We identified the areas where Navajo people were living and selected those areas to include in the land exchange.”

On Nov. 6, 2017, President Russell Begaye signed off on an initial land exchange with the NM SLO for over 37,700 acres along the Nation’s eastern border.

Lands prioritized in the current 2017 exchange were State Trust Lands that were used by Navajo communities and also State Trust Lands that were surrounded by Navajo Trust Lands.

The Nation also prioritized lands with historical and cultural significance as well as lands that would consolidate checker-boarded areas in the Eastern Navajo Agency.

“The Nation, as a whole, will benefit from the conveyed 45,562 acres. The area where the lands are located was under multiple jurisdiction, which caused us to face obstacles in road construction and running power lines,” President Begaye said. “In the best interest of our people, my administration prioritized resolving these issues with this historic exchange.”