

The Navajo Nation makes inroads in the Biden-Harris Administration

Written by Staff Reports with contributions from Joaquin Estus and Aliyah Chavez Indian Country Today
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Two new appointments focus on energy, transportation

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Two members of the Navajo Nation have been appointed to serve in the Biden-Harris Administration.

Wahleah Johns has been named to serve as the head of the Office of Indian Energy, under the U. S. Department of Energy. In that position she will assist tribes with energy development,

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capacity building, energy cost reduction and electrification of tribal lands and homes.

In her previous capacity, she served as the executive director of Native Renewables, assisting in efforts to achieve energy independence by bringing solar power to off-the-grid-homes for Navajo and Hopi families.

Johns is originally from Tonizhoni, Ariz. She grew up on and near the Navajo Reservation, where about 15 percent of homes lacked piped water and 10 percent did not have electricity.

She wrote a *New York Times* op-ed in May about the situation there.

Indian Country Today reproduced part of it.

“How is it that the Navajo Nation borders 80 miles of the Colorado River and doesn’t have access to one drop of water? How can it be that coal and water from Navajo lands helped create electricity for Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Phoenix, and yet 15,000 families on the reservation don’t have power?

“Our tribal government was formed in 1923 with the express purpose of completing a business transaction to sign oil lease agreements with Standard Oil,” Johns wrote. “This was the beginning of a system in which corporations could make billions pillaging our homelands for uranium, coal, oil and gas deposits, leaving our groundwater contaminated and our people sickened with uranium radiation exposure, lung disease, asthma and cancer.”

She pointed out that without power lines, families on the reservation rely on batteries and gas generators. This can cost families anywhere from roughly \$150 to \$700 a month just on fuels, depending on the season. “And usually in the winter, it’s more,” she said.

Johns will be taking over an office that sustained a 64 percent budget cut. The Office of Indian Energy’s 2020 budget was \$22 million. The Trump administration requested only \$8 million for

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its 2021 budget.

The office has a staff of seven people, with three in Wash., D.C., and two each in Golden, Colo., and Anchorage, Alaska. The office will provide services to the nation's 574 tribes, promoting tribal energy development, stabilizing energy costs, strengthening energy infrastructure and electrifying Indian land, housing and businesses.

ARLANDO TELLER JOINS BIDEN-HARRIS ADMINISTRATION

Arlando Teller, who is originally from Chinle, Ariz., resigned his position as a member of the Ariz. House of Reps. for Dist. 7 on Jan. 31, just after being elected to a second term in November, to accept the post of dep. asst. secy. for Tribal Affairs under the U. S. Dept. of Transportation.

"It was a bittersweet decision for me," Teller told *Indian Country Today*. "I thought about it and thought, on a grander scale, my action and advocacy will affect more Indigenous people's lives."

Teller previously served as the dep. exec. dir. for the Navajo Nation Div. of Transportation, Calif. Dept. of Transportation and the City of Phoenix Aviation Dept.

Teller made it clear he takes his new position and its responsibilities very seriously.

"There are mothers across many tribal nations that are hoping I listen to them and heed their concerns about school bus routes, bridges, and the airports that fly community members in and out of rural communities throughout America," he said.

Teller is currently undergoing orientation and will work remotely until it is safe to relocate to Washington, D.C.

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Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez expressed his regard for both Johns and Teller.

“In my conversations with the Biden-Harris Administration, I’ve advocated for the appointment of our Navajo people to high-level positions to help advance the issues of all tribes at the federal level,” he said.

Recently, Nez spoke with recently-confirmed U.S. Dept. of Transportation Secy. Pete Buttigieg, regarding road improvements and infrastructure needs on the Navajo Nation. Working with Navajo Nation Division of Transportation Executive Director Garret Silversmith, the Office of the President and Vice President is in the process of submitting road and transportation priorities to his office.

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