

Bennett Freeze update

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Friday, 27 November 2015 07:11



Begaye, Nez sign MOU

NATAANII AREA-President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez have been actively addressing the lack of infrastructure issues that exist in the Former Bennett Freeze Area (FBFA).

On Nov. 21, both leaders traveled out to Lorrena Sheppard's residence, in what is known as the Nataanii Area near Black Falls, to formally sign a Memorandum of Understanding between the Navajo Nation and the Bureau of Indian Affairs Navajo Region to develop an Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) addressing the FBFA.

An interdisciplinary team will be composed of both Navajo Nation and BIA personnel that will develop and address an Environmental Assessment/Impact Statement along with other compliance work. The MOU identifies interdisciplinary team members, defines roles and responsibilities of each party and identifies project time frames.

The MOU also defines the resources to be evaluated.

In developing the goals and policies for the project, the Navajo Nation and BIA must form a cooperative relationship to provide direction for the planning and implementation of the IRMP for the FBFA.

"I want to congratulate the Begaye-Nez administration for understanding the need for this MOU

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and agreeing to this high-level partnership,” said Sharon Pinto, regional director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Navajo Region.

According to Pinto, by implementing the MOU, an interdisciplinary team will go out and collect data on the existing natural resources located in the area. They will then determine how these resources can be utilized in the development of the FBFA.

“This is a critical document,” she said “I appreciate the administration for seeing that this is the first step toward some real development.”

President Russell Begaye said the MOU is a way to effectively collaborate between the Navajo Nation and the BIA to bring substantial change within shorter time frames.

“I think collectively we can do more,” he said. “Right now, if we’re looking strictly at one department or agency to address the many issues that exist, it’s not going to happen. The need is too overwhelming.”

To see the conditions FBFA residents are facing, both Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez have toured the area and listened to the needs expressed by area families. For this reason, Begaye felt it was important to sign the MOU at a residence located on the FBFA and not at a chapter house.

“We are here to see first hand the conditions our people are living in and it’s better for us to be where the people are to adequately address their concerns.” Begaye said.

Begaye said he sees the MOU as a way to untangle the bureaucracy that can often stifle progress in bringing infrastructure to the area. The response to these needs should be immediate and shouldn’t take five or ten years, he said.

“It’s a beautiful country out here. It’s peaceful under the open skies and land. However, in the

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midst of all this beauty, there is so much need that exists among the residents of the FBFA.”

Over 60 community members gathered at the Sheppard residence for the day’s signing. Afterward, President Begaye and Vice President Nez gave away over 200 turkey baskets to the gathered elderly and those across the FBFA for their Thanksgiving meal.