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Speaker Bates urges Obama Administration to support the Bears Ears National Conservation Area/National Monument proposal



PHOTO: Speaker LoRenzo Bates with federal officials and tribes from the Bears Ears Coalition at Bears Ears on July 17, 2015.

BEARS EARS, UT – Speaker LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad, Newcomb, San Juan, Tiis Tsoh Sikaad, Tse'Daa'Kaan, Upper Fruitland) took part in a historic meeting with officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Land Management, and tribes from the Bears Ears Coalition on Friday, and urged the Obama administration to support the designation of 1.9 million acres of land in San Juan County in Utah, to be designated as a National Conservation Area or a National Monument.

The meeting was held outdoors at the Bears Ears area, to allow federal officials to gain a firsthand perspective of the land base and to meet hundreds of local tribal members who gathered for the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Gathering, an event hosted by the Bears Ears Coalition that focused on reconnecting the tribes with their ancestral land and traditional culture.

On March 12, the Navajo Nation Council's Naabik'iyátí' Committee unanimously passed a resolution in support of the federal designation of Bears Ears — ancestral home of many Southwestern Native American tribes.

According to the resolution, the area is the birthplace of Navajo Headman Manuelito. Navajo, Ute,

Zuni, Hopi, and other Native American people depend on the land within the region to sustain their traditional livelihoods and cultural practices, such as hunting, gathering, and ceremonial purposes. The Bears Ears National Conservation Area/National Monument proposal would also protect archaeological resources.

“Think back hundreds of years and imagine these lands occupied and being used to collect herbs, wood, and other resources that remain important to tribes today,” said Speaker Bates. “The tribes here today are united and we ask the Obama administration to move this initiative forward.”

Federal officials in attendance included U.S. Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Kevin Washburn, National Park Service Director Jonathan B. Jarvis, Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Butch Blazer, Bureau of Land Management Deputy Director Steve Ellis, and U.S. Department of the Interior Deputy Chief of Staff Nikki Buffa.

Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To ii), who sponsored the legislation, previously stated that the initiative to protect the Bears Ears area was initiated by local Utah Navajos, but that the combined collective interest of tribes in the region including Ute, Hopi, Hualapai, Zuni, and others only makes the proposal more viable.

The resolution also supports the establishment of collaborative management agreements between the tribes and the federal government to improve management and to strengthen the tribes’ influence in the long-term management of the region.

The process to protect the region was initiated over five years ago by Utah Diné Bikéyah, a legally recognized non-profit organization in Utah created by a group of elders and traditional practitioners who came together over concerns for the aboriginal lands, particularly limitations placed on uses of the land for traditional and ceremonial uses.

Representatives from the Cochiti Pueblo, Hopi Tribe, Zuni Pueblo, and Ute Mountain Ute Nations were among the tribes who participated in the meeting with federal officials, each expressing their strong support of the initiative.

During the meeting, Speaker Bates also urged the tribal coalition to remain united throughout the process in order to achieve the ultimate goal of conserving the area.

“We are united in moving this forward, but I also recognize that there will be opposition,” stated Speaker Bates. “In order to get where we want to be, we need to remain unified and understand that it’s not going to be easy.”

Through the Antiquities Act of 1906, U.S. presidents are empowered to protect natural, historical, and cultural areas by designating them as national monuments — an option that tribes urge the Obama administration to act on before leaving office.

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