

Navajo Nation Advocates for Interior Secretary's Support for the Protection of Chaco Culture National Historical Park

On May 28, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and New Mexico Pueblo tribal leaders met with U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich (D-NM) and U.S. Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt, as they visited the Chaco Culture National Historical Park, to continue advocating for the protection of the cultural and historical sites in the area that are sacred to many tribes.

In April, U.S. Senators Martin Heinrich and Tom Udall (D-NM) introduced S. 1079: the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act of 2019, which would create a 10-mile "buffer zone" around the Chaco landscape to prevent oil and gas development in the area. U.S. Representatives Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM) and Deb Haaland (D-NM) introduced the same bill in the House.

"This is about preserving our teachings and our way of life for Indigenous people. In addition to that, we are encouraging more studies to be conducted to assess the impacts of oil and gas drilling on the health and safety of our people who reside in the area and on the environment. There are many stories and teachings that our people have passed down for generations – it serves as a foundation for the identity of our people," said President Nez.

The visit was the first time Secretary Bernhardt viewed the Greater Chaco Landscape in person. During the Secretary's confirmation hearing before the U.S. Senate, Senator Heinrich requested Secretary Bernhardt visit the area to gain a firsthand perspective of the cultural and historical significance that it holds for tribes.

"I am very grateful to Senator Heinrich, Senator Udall, Congressman Lujan,



Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez, U.S. Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt, U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, and other tribal leaders visit the Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico.



Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez (center) speaks with U.S. Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt and U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) at the Chaco Culture National Historical Park.

and Congresswoman Haaland for sponsoring the bill and for the Secretary's visit. I believe through our dialogue, we have a path forward to work together to protect this special area," added President Nez.

Other tribal leaders in attendance included Pueblo of Isleta Gov. Edward Paul Torres, Pueblo of Acoma Gov. Brian D. Vallo, Santa Ana Pueblo Gov. Tim Manchego, and a representative of Santa Clara Pueblo. Bureau of Land Management New Mexico State Director Tim Spisak and Chaco Culture National Historical Park Superintendent Denise Robertson were also part of the tour.

Secretary Bernhardt said he has a greater appreciation and understanding for the importance and cultural significance of the Chaco landscape for tribes. He added that the U.S. Department of the Interior would revisit its position on the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act of 2019 to work together to develop a path forward to address the concerns of the tribes. ♣

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