

Navajo Nation Opposes New Mexico Drilling Ban Tucked Into Biden's \$3.5 Trillion Bill

The 24th Navajo Nation Council has come out against President Biden's \$3.5 trillion social welfare and climate change bill because it bans new drilling outside Chaco Culture National Historical Park in northwestern New Mexico. The Navajos said the ban is a "real threat" to the livelihoods of tribal members. The council asked House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy to hold a field hearing in Nageezi, New Mexico, before approving "any language prohibiting new oil and gas development."

"We applaud Congress for its historic inclusion of tribal program investments in the proposed \$3.5 trillion budget resolution and reconciliation proposals," said the Sept. 17 letter obtained by The Washington Times.

"However, we write to respectfully inform you of our opposition to the [manager's] amendment of the House Natural Resources Committee proposal that includes a section to prohibit new oil and gas development within the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area in northwestern New Mexico and the Navajo Nation," the letter said.

The committee's Democratic chairman, Rep. Raul Grijalva of Arizona, sponsored the manager's amendment withdrawing new mineral leasing and nullifying inactive leases within a 10-mile buffer surrounding the park, a 34,000-acre site known for its ancient architectural ruins. No drilling is allowed within the park.

The All Pueblo Council of Governors, the 20 governors of New Mexico's Pueblo nations, previously supported the 10-mile buffer zone, while the Navajo Nation Council advocated for a five-mile zone. They said the smaller buffer safeguards the area's cultural resources as well as the interests of Navajo property holders.

"The official position of the Navajo Nation reflects the interests of the Navajo allotted landowners [allottees] in the greater Chaco area and it provides a compromise between the threat to their livelihoods and the bills' calls for increased protections from mineral development," said the Navajo letter. In May, Sen. Martin Heinrich, New Mexico Democrat, asked Interior Secretary Deb Haaland to set a 10-mile buffer via administrative withdrawal, saying it would "provide interim protection until permanent protection can be secured legislatively."

Kathleen Sgamma, Western Energy Alliance president, said the five-mile buffer would "ensure protection of cultural resources while enabling responsible development of energy."

"Now the Democrats are trying to sneak into the reconciliation bill a measure that would shut down the livelihoods of Navajo families who depend on oil and gas production for income in an otherwise marginalized, impoverished area," said Ms. Sgamma in an email. "Depriving them of a major source of income is not only environmental injustice, but bad for Navajo consumers paying high prices at the pump."

The manager's amendment further curtails mineral development by reversing a land swap between the federal government and copper-mining interests in Arizona's Oak Flat area; prohibits new oil-and-gas leasing in Colorado's

Thompson Divide, and bars offshore leasing in the Outer Continental Shelf, as reported by States Newsroom.

Signing the Navajo letter were Navajo Nation Council Speaker Seth Damon, council delegate Mark Freeland, and Resources and Development Committee Chair Rickie Nez.

They said a field hearing would allow members of Congress to “hear directly from the Navajo people who face a real threat under the current version of the managers amendment.”