

Utah governor, congressman pledge to work with Navajo Nation on Bears Ears

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MONUMENT VALLEY, Utah – During a public meeting on March 12, Navajo Nation leadership stood united in opposing House Bill 4532 sponsored by U.S. Rep. John Curtis, R-Dist. 3, of Utah, which seeks the approval of congress to confirm and codify President Trump’s 2017 proclamation that reduced the size of the Bears Ears National Monument by 85-percent and divided it into two smaller monuments. On Dec. 4, 2017, the Navajo Nation filed a lawsuit challenging President Trump’s action.

Speaker LoRenzo Bates, Vice President Jonathan Nez, several members of the Navajo Nation Council, and local chapter presidents voiced their opposition to the bill during a public meeting with Curtis and Utah Gov. Gary R. Herbert March 12, at the Monument Valley Welcome Center. The Nation’s leaders also called upon Herbert and Curtis to work cooperatively with the Navajo Nation to develop solutions to address the Bears Ears National Monument.

Council Delegates Davis Filfred, Herman Daniels Jr., and Nathaniel Brown, who each represent Utah chapters, respectfully asked Curtis to withdraw the bill and sit down together to discuss other possibilities to address the concerns of both sides.

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Speaker Bates said that while it is clear that Utah leadership and Navajo leadership differ in their positions on the Bears Ears National Monument, it is important for the two sides to sit down, talk, and try to find some middle ground on the issue.

“If there is middle ground, it has to start at the local level. The Navajo Nation Council took a position and we won’t change our position unless the local Utah chapters want that,” said Bates, who also acknowledged support from the Navajo Utah Commission.

Nez requested that Herbert and Curtis uphold a provision that was included in former President Obama’s proclamation that designated the original Bears Ears National Monument, which allowed tribes to co-manage the national monument.

“Before this area was a state, our people resided here and in the Bears Ears area,” Nez said. “Native peoples know what is best for the land because we’ve taken care of the land since time immemorial.”

Herbert said that in his view there are three possible outcomes that include having the court decide in favor of the Navajo Nation and other tribes, or having the court rule in favor of Trump, or working together on a “legislative fix” that allows for the protection of the Bears Ears area and gives Native Americans more control over the management of the land.

“I think there’s been a lot of misunderstanding, some miscommunication, and I think we could’ve done a better job in working together to get where I think we all want to be on this issue,” Herbert said. “As we go forward let’s make sure the communication is better — it ought to be open, it ought to be honest, and we ought to deal with the facts and not what we wish the facts were. I want to see us be proactive and work together to do something better. I’m ready to do it.”

Curtis also expressed optimism that solutions could be developed through the legislative process. He added that he wants to protect the Bears Ears area from looting, drilling, and mineral extraction, and allow Navajo people to gather wood and herbs as they have done for centuries.

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“I do not have the ability in any way, shape, or form to give you what President Trump took away – I cannot do that. I just don’t have that ability. I do have the ability to give you a legislative answer that I think is even better than what President Trump took away,” added Curtis. “I would hope and ask of all of you is that you give me that opportunity to do all of these things that we agree are important. I need to hear specifically what you want to see differently in my bill. I’m willing to make changes. I’m anxious to make this a better bill. I invite all you to think about how we accomplishment what is most important to all of us.”

The March 12 meeting marked the second time that Navajo Nation leaders have met with Curtis and requested him to withdraw his H.B. 4532. At the conclusion of the meeting, Herbert and Curtis pledged to continue meeting with leadership of the Navajo Nation and working toward solutions that address the Bears Ears National Monument.

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