

Navajo Nation EPA gets new executive director

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Goal of Valinda Shirley to strengthen communication with Navajo people

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer announced the appointment of Valinda Shirley as the new Executive Director for the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency on Jan. 4. She replaces Oliver B. Whaley, who resigned in December to spend more time with his family.

Shirley resides in Rock Point, Ariz. with her husband and children. She is Táchiinii and born for Tł'ízí lání. Her maternal grandfather is Bit'ahnii and her paternal grandfather is Ta'neeshahnii. Prior to her appointment, she served as the Senior Remedial Project Manager for the Navajo Nation EPA Superfund Program coordinating on-site activities for environmental cleanup or remediation projects to ensure compliance with Navajo Nation and federal environmental laws, standards, regulations, and requirements including Diné Fundamental Law.

“With her upbringing, education, and professional experience, we are excited and confident that she will do a great job leading the Navajo Nation EPA. Her traditional upbringing combined with her formal education in biochemistry provides for a unique and very knowledgeable perspective on many issues related to protecting our environment for generations to come. We welcome her to our administration and look forward to working alongside her,” Nez said.

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Shirley earned a Bachelor's Degree in Biochemistry from the University of New Mexico and graduated as the valedictorian from Rock Point High School. Her previous professional experience also includes serving as an Environmental Compliance Technician with SWCA Environmental Consultants, Acting Business Manager and business consultant with Rock Point Community School, Environmental Specialist with the Navajo Nation EPA Waste Regulatory, Community Involvement Coordinator for the Phase 2 Removal Site Evaluation Trust, and the School Board Vice President for Rock Point Community School.

In her previous role with the Abandoned Uranium Mines projects, Shirley spearheaded the Northeast Church Rock Mine Site and the Tronox sites in Cove and Tse Tah, Ariz. She also advised the U.S. EPA concerning Navajo Nation laws and Diné Fundamental Law as Applicable or Relevant & Appropriate Requirements used in the clean-up standards at the Mariano Lake, Mac and Black Mine Sites located in New Mexico. She also coordinated with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on a Source Material License amendment for the United Nuclear Corporation mill site in the Eastern Navajo Agency.

"I hold the Office of the Executive Director of the Navajo EPA in the highest regard, and I have the utmost respect for the agency and its employees. Since 1992, Navajo EPA has been the regulatory authority that safeguards Diné bikéyah dóó Nihookaa' Dine'é. In my experience working with the agency, it has served as an integral part of government by ensuring Nihimá Nahasdzaan dóó Nihit'aa' Yádiłhił are kept clean to the highest of standards for our seventh-generation grandchildren," Shirley said.

As the new Executive Director, Shirley said her goals include strengthening direct lines of communication with the Navajo people through community involvement and Ké, ensuring that currently funded AUMs progress to a level of clean-up with tangible results, and strategizing a way for the Navajo Nation to address the illegal dumping of refuse.

"I will accomplish these goals by exercising stable leadership to create a team environment in the agency. Communication and Ké are also crucial in fulfilling these goals. I know this because these ideals are ingrained in me and practiced as a school board member representing four Navajo communities in the Northern Navajo Agency. I am familiar with fiduciary trust responsibilities and passionately believe that projects, legislation, and meaningful change can happen through teamwork and collaboration from all government branches," Shirley stated.

"I view U.S. EPA and other federal agencies as partners of the Navajo EPA, and I also believe

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in the inviolability of our Navajo Nation laws. Navajo Nation laws and regulations are in place to protect the Diné, especially when federal regulations become lax in their standards. In the past, only federal laws were used as across-the-board clean-up standards that failed in protecting the Diné. Therefore, it is imperative to safeguard affected communities by ensuring that Navajo Nation laws and regulations are adhered to,” she added.

Valinda Shirley’s appointment is subject to confirmation by the Navajo Nation Council, in accordance with the Navajo Nation Code. Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr. will sponsor the bill for confirmation.