

Written by gallupsun

Wednesday, 06 December 2023 21:11

WASHINGTON D.C. — Delegate Carl Roessel Slater of the 25th Navajo Nation Council, representing the communities of Tsaile/Wheatfields, Lukachukai, Round Rock, Tséché'izhí, and Rock Point, delivered a poignant testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Dec. 5. The hearing, titled "Limited Access and Damaging Gateway Economies: Examining the National Parks Air Tour Management Program," included contributions from one federal witness and four non-federal witnesses.

Slater underscored the risks posed by air tours to the Navajo people, including intrusion of privacy, potential damage to cultural sites, and environmental impacts. He recounted instances when sacred ceremonies were disrupted by low-flying aircraft, and voiced concerns about potential harm to irreplaceable sacred sites and local wildlife. The close physical presence of even small aircraft can lead to erosion or other forms of disruption and damage, including pollution from aircraft emissions and noise.

"Delegate Slater's testimony underscores an important matter that needs to be addressed," President Buu Nygren, who was unable to attend the hearing in Washington, D.C., said. "While I appreciate the desire to explore our Nation's beauty, it is important to do so in a manner that respects our impacted local communities. I support the implementation of an Air Tour Management Plan and urge Congress to work with us to find sustainable solutions that respect our rights and safeguards our sacred lands for future generations through adequate and meaningful tribal consultation."

Slater highlighted the necessity of tribal consultation in air tour management.

"Local tribal members are best equipped to know the risks associated with air tours, and the federal government has an obligation to ensure tribes are consulted at every level of tribal government, to ensure their perspectives and concerns are incorporated into those plans," he said.

He also stressed the need for fair economic opportunities for the Navajo Nation, which currently sees little to no financial gain from these activities. He proposed measures, including requiring tour companies to hire local Native guides, setting aside a percentage of flights for Native-owned businesses, and mandating tour companies operating in tribal airspace to pay

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tribal taxes.

“The only just way to proceed is to ensure tribes help shape the air tour management plans and reap some of the economic benefits of these tours,” he concluded.

Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley agreed that the federal government needs to consult with the tribes when it comes to air tours.

“Air Tour Management Plans can be devised responsibly through tribal consultation. The federal government has the responsibility for consultation at every step,” Curley said. “The federal government needs to meet tribes at their level of capacity and let tribes set the pace of consultation. We need to ensure that tribes benefit from economic development and revenue generation related to air tourism.”

The hearing also saw testimonies from Ray Sauvajot, Associate Director of Natural Resource Stewardship and Science Directorate, John Wells, Chairman of the Board of the Military Veterans Advocacy, Jake Tomlin, President of Grand Canyon Scenic Airlines, and Mark A. Schlaefli, President of Rushmore Helicopters. Each presented their perspective on the impact of restrictive Air Tour Management Plans on their respective sectors.

As the hearing concluded, Chair Paul Gosar and Ranking Member Melanie Stansbury echoed the need to ensure that the Air Tour Management Plan development process includes all stakeholders to ensure the best possible outcome.



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