

## **Written testimony of Chester Johnson, The San Juan County Navajo.**

To: The United States Senate Committee of Natural Resources and Energy.  
July 27, 2016

Good afternoon Chairman Lee, and honorable members of The Committee on Natural Resources and Energy.

My name is Chester Johnson, resident of San Juan County, Utah, and I am a direct descendent of Kayellii. Kayellii was a brave Navajo warrior who believed in the protection of land, freedom, and independence. He evaded capture by the U.S. soldiers in the early 1860's by taking refuge in the Bears Ears Mountain and Canyons with a band of Navajos. He was a Brother to chief Manaelito, signer of the Navajo 1868 Treaty.

I am here to provide testimony on the sacredness of the Bears Ears region, support the Public Lands Initiative (PLI) proposal, and oppose the Bears Ears inter-tribal coalition proposal.

Bears Ears is a sacred land. In a traditional view, it is a symbol of moral inspiration, of strength, and a sustainer of healthy life. The land provides good plant foods such as wild red berries, pinons, and good fresh meat from wild game, which we annually pick and hunt to nourish our physical health.

The Bears Ears area is a homeland of our ancestors' spirit, healing plants, and worship sights. When we go and walk on Bears Ears mountain with a meditative mind and respect, we feel renewed physically and spiritually. We feel the spirits of our ancestors who walked this land before us. We feel the strengths and freedoms which Kayellii courageously stood and fought for. We feel whole, protected, and enlightened as we slowly gaze at the beautiful, majestic view of Bears Ears mountain, cedar trees, the fresh smell of medicine plant, and wild flowers.

Bears Ears land is like a Navajo traditional medicine bundle. It holds a variety of medicine herbs and they grow abundantly in certain areas. Medicine persons often travel to Bears Ears mountain to get lush medicines for healing ceremonies.

The Bears Ears land also provides a quiet, peaceful place to be in oneness with nature and holy people. Ceremonial prayers are done near or around certain trees, plants, or a special designated shrine where ancestors did their prayers and ceremonies.

If president Obama succeeds in making Bears Ears land a national monument, the Utah Navajos will be shut off from their traditional practices of harvesting herbal medicine and conducting healing ceremonies and prayers.

The Public Lands Initiative (PLI) proposal is an important proposal. The proposal was put together over many years with the involvement of San Juan County citizens including the seven Utah Navajo chapters.

The unique aspect of the PLI proposal is its focus and expression of Utah Navajo's crucial needs in relation to Navajo culture, spiritual belief, and economic development that would bring prosperity to Utah Navajo communities. Some of the specific features, interests, and needs expressed in the PLI proposal are:

1. A national conservation area designation of the Bears Ears region with some establishment of wilderness area. These proposed designations are supported by the majority of San Juan County citizens.
2. A comprehensive land proposal put together by the citizens of San Juan County, Utah. No one is excluded, but rather everyone was encouraged to contribute to the proposal at public meetings throughout the county.
3. Allowing Utah Navajos, constituents, and chapters to participate in the proposed process. Most Navajos support a national conservation area (NCA). NCA values respect their historical ties to the Bears Ears area, access to natural resource sites for performances in ceremonial practices, and the prospect of future economic development to reduce poverty on reservations.
4. Offering ideals of local control, local ownership, and local management of land through establishing a co-management board consisting of representatives of San Juan County ethnic groups. This is the heart and soul of the PLI proposal to which all county residents agree and believe as the greatest protection of public land.
5. Recognizing the critical need of public land revenues for San Juan County schools.
6. Giving a strong prospect of transferring federal mineral rights on the McCracken extension of the Navajo reservation to the Utah Navajo Trust Fund.

These are the outstanding reasons why I support the PLI proposal. Also, as a San Juan county resident, I have the right to voice my opinions and support as to how our public land should be controlled and managed. With the PLI proposal, we will have the opportunity to set land management policy and decisions that will assure great protection for our land.

I oppose the Bears Ears inter-tribal coalition proposal. The proposal does not truly represent the Utah Navajos. This forty page document will not benefit the citizens of San Juan County.

I disagree with lots of what is written in the proposal, but, I will bring out a few that do not reflect the wishes and desire of the Utah Navajos:

1. The proposal was written by people who are not residents of San Juan County. These people are environmentalists, archeologists, rock climbers, and Indian tribes of New Mexico, Arizona, and a few continually dissatisfied Navajo tribal officials. They lack a background of specific knowledge of the bears ears region that is essential in making humane, reasonable land designation decisions.
2. The coalition proposal is unilaterally imposing a national monument and closing off 1.9 million acres of public land. This is an insane and senseless act. The motive for this type of action is greed, pride, and inclination of satisfying specific

interested groups. It totally excluded the people of San Juan County, therefore, it does not benefit us.

3. The coalition proposal is asking for establishing a national monument with a presidential provision for allowance of accessibility for native people to obtain and use natural resources. The Antiquities Act of 1906, does not make such allowance. This is a tactic used to generate support for the proposal. Also, proponents are telling Utah Navajos that they will move back to the Bear Ears region and the land will be given back to them. However, many Navajos are beginning to realize that it is a total lie.
4. The proposal advocates a tribal collaborative management with three (3) federal agencies of a bears ears national monument. This type of management system is unworkable, and very likely will create a chaotic situation. The system will select people with no managerial ability, disagreements, and protocol that will incapacitate decision-making all way up to the office of Secretary of Interior. Also, there is no guarantee if county residents wish and benefits will be a priority with the selected five tribes.
5. The coalition proposal designated Navajo Nation as a collaborative management board member. This is a serious problem and a great dilemma for the Navajo nation. In early 1980's during Peterson Zah's administration, the tribe relinquished a bears ears claim case in the US Indian claim court. In doing so, the tribe accepted over thirty million dollars for relinquishing the claim case, and restricted itself from being involved in any claim or matter relating to the Bear Ears region. The current Navajo Nation president ignored this decision made by the Indian claim court. I would like to add too, the Aneth people and chapter protested the tribal government's acceptance of the money. The Aneth people had pursued this claim case since the early 1950's, and they were near winning the case when the Navajo nation relinquished the case for the money.
6. The coalition proposal is a secret document. My chapter, Aneth, and other Utah Navajo chapters never read or heard the full content of the proposal before it was released. As such, Utah government Navajos never contributed to this document.

#### Conclusion

I am a proponent of the Public Land Initiative proposal. The proposal stands for a national conservation area and it contains the wishes of Utah Navajos. The proposal assures great protection of our public land while balancing economic development in a way that will bring prosperity to Utah Navajo communities. It also ensures protection of resources, native people, sacred sights, and remains. A majority of Utah Navajos support the PLI proposal. I oppose the Bears Ears inter-tribal coalition proposal. The proposal is only written for the few, mostly environmentalists, archeologists, and out of state native tribes. This document also provoked serious division among Utah Navajo communities, families, and friends. It offers no benefit to San Juan County people.

I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony to the Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Energy.

Thank you.