



LOC and RDC hear reports and discuss laws to address Navajo Nation feral dog population

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — This week, the Law & Order Committee (LOC) and Resources and Development Committee (RDC) of the 24th Navajo Nation Council held separate meetings where reports were given by various Navajo Nation government entities regarding the growing issues of feral dogs in communities.

The reports were requested after a recent incident, where 13-year-old Lyssa Rose Upshaw was fatally attacked by a pack of dogs in the Fort Defiance area. The Council held a moment of silence for her at last Friday's Special Session to mourn her passing.

“Life is not worth a small fine nor a simple warning,” said Chairman Rickie Nez (T'iistoh Sikaad, Nenahnezad, Upper Fruitland, Tse' Daa' Kaan, Newcomb, San Juan). “These laws need to change because it is now a matter of life and death that we cannot afford to ignore.”

Between the two meetings, reports were provided by the Navajo Nation Department of Criminal Investigations, Navajo Nation Department of Fish and Wildlife, Navajo Nation Animal Control and Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

During LOC's meeting on Monday, reports centered around identifying and gathering recommendations on the Navajo Nation's current laws concerning animal attacks and prioritizing public safety.

According to estimates by Senior Animal Control Officer Joe Begay, the Navajo Nation has approximately 500,000 feral and domestic dogs and just one mating pair of dogs can create up to 5,700 new dogs in five years.

Currently under Council Resolution No. CJY-64-18, an amendment to Title 13 of the Navajo Nation code, each household is allowed up to four dogs for animal owners under a lease agreement within housing sites.

Begay indicated he is one of only seven officers patrolling the Navajo Nation and explained that Animal Control's significant budget cuts have dwindled their force by 16 officers and limited their ability to conduct animal sweeps.

“These dogs travel long distances and roam freely around the Nation,” said Begay. “With our budget, we have been more reactive than proactive and we need stronger laws to help people be better pet owners.”

Begay added Animal Control experienced additional struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic battling the growing dog population – only capturing 8,000 dogs in 2020 versus an upward of 30,000 in previous years.

Director of Criminal Investigations, Michael Henderson, said the recent dog attacks are not the first and that the Navajo Nation Police Department has received multiple reports about dog attacks resulting in severe injuries, including three other deaths in the past year.

Henderson recalled a recent case in Tiis Tsoh Sikaad where a 5-year-old was also fatally attacked by a dog. According to Henderson, the dog's owner was only given a \$500 citation for the attack, which he says is a common penalty that does not help the issue.

"[It] doesn't seem that justice was served at the end," stated Henderson. "Our department has distributed press releases to bring awareness to the issue and encourages the public to remain vigilant for their safety."

Henderson acknowledged the current laws surrounding animal attacks do not waive criminal prosecution due to the inability to determine whether attacks are intentional or not on behalf of dog owners.

During RDC's regular meeting Wednesday, Animal Control suggested it would cost the Navajo Nation \$3.1 million to bring staffing levels up to five animal control officers per agency. But, the extra staff could help restructure the program, enforce criminal penalties and better educate the public on responsible pet ownership.

LOC Vice Chairman Otto Tso (Tónaneesdizi) suggested the development of emergency legislation to allocate funds to Animal Control through the Navajo Nation's Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance to begin combatting the issues.

RDC members also suggested seeking emergency funding for additional Animal Control officers and for the Navajo veterinary program for increasing the spay and neutering clinics.

Chairman Nez recommended appropriating emergency funds to the issues and asked Fish and Wild Life to begin gathering documents. Additionally, Nez called for changes to the Navajo Nation's policy on the maximum number of dogs a person can own.

Multiple delegates, including Health Education and Human Services Committee Chairman Daniel Tso (Littlewater, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake, Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Ojo Encino, Counselor), have called for Naabik'iyatí' work sessions and a special Council Session in the coming weeks to further address the Navajo Nation's dog population.

"This is bigger than us as the 24th Navajo Nation Council, the President's office and any other Navajo Nation government entity," added Chairman Tso. "The issues are evidently a lack of funding for enforcement and also prosecution of dog owners."

In the meantime, the 24th Navajo Nation Council encourages members of the Navajo Nation to promote safety by ensuring young children remain supervised and by contacting Animal Control if any emergencies or violations are suspected.

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