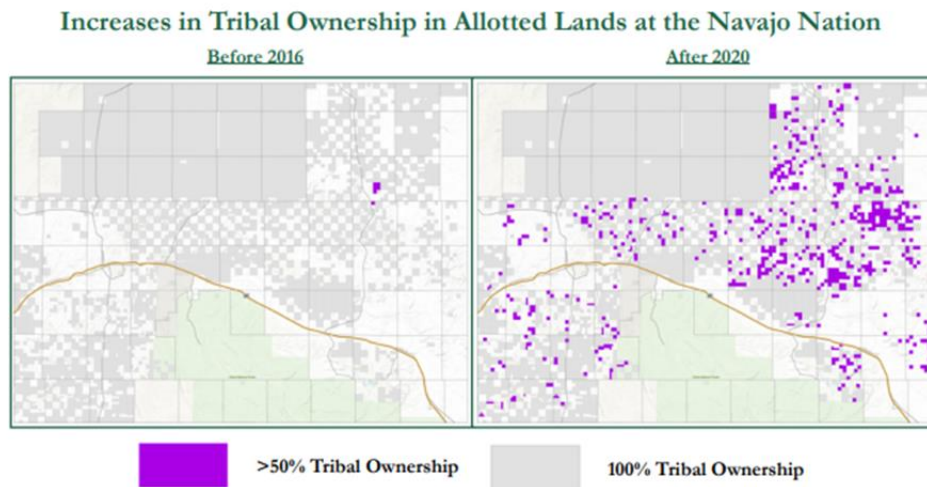




Land Buy-Back Program Closes with Considerable Success



Map of program success in the Navajo Nation (From the Program report).

The United States Department of the Interior (DOI) released a [report](#) last week on the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations, which ended on November 24th, 2022. This comprehensive 93-page document examines the circumstances around the program, the need, process, goals, and end results of the ten-year program.

When the program first began, there were over 2.9 million fractional interests available to purchase, now that number is down to 2.4 million. Fractionation is common on individual Indian allotments as a result of tracts of land passing to numerous heirs over generations. According to the report it is common for some allotments to have hundreds and even thousands of owners. One of the major hurdles of this program was finding the current contact information for property owners identified as “Whereabouts Unknown” (WAU). Approximately 24,000 WAUs (of nearly 53,000 total) were found, and their contact information updated through this program.

The Indian Right of Way Act of 1948 required majority ownership consent to grant rights-of-way over allotted parcels of land, and if a tribe owned any land in the tract, tribal consent was also required. The buy-back program consolidated ownership and tribally-owned land in many regions, making right-of-way grants and improvements much less cumbersome. As a result of the program, the Navajo Nation was able to improve a right-of-way in the Casamero Lake Chapter. Paving this dirt road had been inhibited because

of some 400 WAU property owners along the route. Through the work of the program to establish contact with all property owners, the Nation was able to utilize this updated information to pave the road.

Overall, the program paid \$1.69 billion to 123,000 individuals to consolidate nearly 3 million equivalent acres for tribes. In the Navajo Nation alone, over 204 thousand equivalent acres were restored to the Nation. This increases the Nation's ability to exercise tribal sovereignty and self-determination over more of our land.

This program faced significant skepticism from leaders throughout Indian Country at its outset over a decade ago, but the program provided significant benefits for both landowners and tribes.