



## **President Nygren Advocates for Disaster Assistance**



*From Left to Right: Nena Shaw, Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for OLEM, John Events, Acting Assistant Administrator for OLEM, President Buu Nygren, and Victoria Tran, Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Office of International and Tribal Affairs.*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – On Wednesday, July 9, President Nygren visited Washington to advocate for disaster assistance with federal agencies in response to the devastation caused by the Oak Ridge fire near Window Rock.

President Nygren first met with senior leaders from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), including Acting Assistant Administrator for Recovery, Mr. Paul Judson; Regional Administrator for Region IX, Mr. Bob Fenton; and National Tribal Affairs Advisor, Ms. Yawna Allen (*Quapaw Nation*), and additional staff. President Nygren spoke of the scope of the fire, which is now 90% contained and has not affected any structures despite burning over 11,000 acres, and the significant impact it has had on the spiritual and financial lives of the area's residents. Many residents are unable to graze their livestock on the lands and are looking for other options.

President Nygren also commended the BIA Navajo Region's efforts on the fire and praised Regional Director Deborah Shirley's dedication to the response. Preliminary estimates put the BIA Navajo Region's expenses at over \$3 million on the fire response. "I am very thankful at just how much BIA [Navajo Region] stepped up in our moment of need," said President Nygren. Regional Administrator Fenton asked President Nygren about visiting the Nation in the coming weeks to meet with emergency management leaders once the fire response has been handled but commended his staff as well who have been on the ground responding to the fire. He also said that he would develop a list of resources available from other federal agencies like USDA that the Nation can utilize to assist in recovery efforts ahead of his visit.

President Nygren ended the meeting by inquiring about past disasters on the Nation where the White House has approved Major Disaster Declarations, particularly the 2023 flooding in the Chinle area and the 2021 severe winter storms. He asked for a written update on both declarations and what, if any, responsibilities still lay with the Nation so that we can apply these "lessons learned" to our recovery efforts for the Oak Ridge fire.

Afterwards, President Nygren met with senior leadership from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to discuss the wildfire response, future disaster preparedness, and long-term environmental planning on the Nation.

Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren met today with senior leadership from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) to discuss wildfire response, future disaster preparedness, and long-term environmental planning on the Navajo Nation.

The meeting included key officials from the EPA's leadership: Victoria Tran, Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Office of International and Tribal Affairs; Lisa Berrios, Acting Director of the American Indian Environmental Office; John Evans, Acting Assistant Administrator for the Office of Land and Emergency Management (OLEM); Nena Shaw, Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for OLEM; and Steven Cook, Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator for OLEM, among others working on emergency response and mine site cleanup.

The opening discussion focused on the Oak Ridge Fire, which has burned more than 11,000 acres on the Navajo Nation. President Nygren expressed his appreciation to the EPA and Region 9 for their swift emergency response and coordination, which ensured the protection of Navajo lands and communities. EPA Region 9 reported that no hazardous materials, debris, or air quality concerns have been detected to date. However, the agency has committed to remain engaged and ready to act pending the final impact assessment from the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency.

EPA officials noted that while the fire currently does not trigger emergency actions under the Safe Drinking Water Act or the Clean Air Act, it remains under continuous monitoring and is "mission assessment ready" if formally declared. This led to a broader conversation about building future response capacity for both natural and man-made disasters, especially as the Navajo Nation expands its renewable energy and natural gas initiatives. President Nygren emphasized the importance of establishing mitigation and containment protocols and urged the EPA to support these efforts with technical assistance and training.

In addition to emergency response, President Nygren raised the issue of solid waste infrastructure on the reservation. Currently, the Navajo Nation operates transfer stations at select chapter houses but must transfer these to outside landfills. President Nygren inquired about the permitting process for developing regional landfills on Navajo land, which would significantly reduce long-term waste management expenses. The EPA committed to working with the Nation to explore funding options for a feasibility study.

President Nygren concluded the meeting by reiterating the importance of protecting natural resources, particularly watersheds, and expressed his appreciation for the EPA's continued partnership. He emphasized the Nation's readiness to collaborate on long-term strategies that promote public health, environmental stewardship, and sustainable development for the Navajo people.