

THE NAVAJO NATION

JONATHAN NEZ | PRESIDENT MYRON LIZER | VICE PRESIDENT



May 11, 2020

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1840 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

David Vela
Deputy Director
National Park Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Bernhardt and Deputy Director Vela,

We hope this letter finds you, your family, and employees in good health and are taking precautionary measures to keep safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. We write to you today urging you to reconsider the reopening of the national parks, and ask you to further postpone this plan.

Here on the Navajo Nation, the spread of this deadly virus has not yet slowed. Cases here are still on a dramatic and dangerous rise. As of May 11, 2020, the Navajo Nation has a total of 3,204 confirmed positive cases and 102 deaths.¹ We've tested 16,780 of our Navajo people and residents.² In fact, the Navajo Nation, which is roughly the same size as West Virginia, has the highest per capita rate of infection than any other state.³ We do not take this news lightly. We value every life within our borders. For this reason, we have one of the highest testing rates in the country. This is why we have extended our weekly and weekend curfews. This is why we have worked closely with Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham and the City of Gallup in the implementation of the Gallup lockdown, a welcomed proactive measure to help us in the slow of the spread of this life-threatening disease.⁴ This is the type of partnership the Navajo Nation believes will help save precious lives.

¹ Navajo Nation, Office of the President and Vice President, Press Release, *82 new cases of COVID-19 and two more deaths reported, nearly 5,000 Navajo families have received food, water, and supplies*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.opvp.navajo-nsn.gov/Portals/0/FILES/PRESS%20RELEASES/2020/May/FOR%20IMMEDIATE%20RELEASE%20-%2082%20new%20cases%20of%20COVID-19%20and%20two%20more%20deaths%20reported,%20nearly%205,000%20Navajo%20families%20have%20received%20food,%20water,%20and%20supplies.pdf> (last visited May 12, 2020).

² Navajo Department of Health, COVID-19, May 11, 2020, <https://www.ndoh.navajo-nsn.gov/COVID-19> (last visited May 12, 2020) (reporting a total of 13,576 negative tests).

³ Rebecca Klar, *Navajo Nation Reports More Coronavirus Cases Per Capita Than Any US State*, The Hill, May 11, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/497091-navajo-nation-has-more-coronavirus-cases-per-capita-than-any-us-state> (last visited May 12, 2020); Felicia Fonseca and Tim Sullivan, 'The grief is so unbearable: Virus takes hold on Navajo', The Washington Post, May 11, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/the-grief-is-so-unbearable-virus-takes-hold-on-navajo/2020/05/11/6c1e0c94-9404-11ea-87a3-22d324235636_story.html (last visited May 12, 2020).

⁴ New Mexico State, Office of the Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, Press Releases, *Governor authorizes Gallup lockdown*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.governor.state.nm.us/2020/05/01/gov-authorizes-gallup-lockdown/> (last visited May 12, 2020).

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The Navajo Nation is blessed to be surrounded by natural beauty and those include National Parks in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico, including the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Chaco Canyon, and Canyon de Chelly, just to name a few. We are concerned with the decision of the National Park Service to begin a phased re-opening of the parks. We know that once these parks are reopened, even just for limited services, we will see an influx of off-reservation visitors. These tourists will again flow day and night through Western Navajoland along the US Route 89 corridor traveling to and from Utah. We have done all we can as a Tribal Nation to battle the coronavirus disease, but to limit travel from tourists and those who do not reside within our borders we need support from our external partners. Without the partnership of our neighbors we cannot keep our People safe.

Today, we extended our Stay-At-Home Order until June 7, 2020. We also intend to continue to limit travel on our roadways throughout our Nation. Visitors will be cited for a civil violation should they travel on the Navajo Nation during curfew hours. We have no choice to continue these measures as we must do all we can to keep our citizens and residents safe. We urge you to reconsider the phased reopening and postpone the reopening plan to a later date.

We ask the National Park Service work with the Navajo Nation on this matter. We need to work in coordination with one another to fight and overcome this pandemic. We appreciate your understanding and look forward to working with you to keep our communities safe. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to us or Santee Lewis, Executive Director of the Navajo Nation Washington Office, at slewis@nnwo.org. Aheéhee', thank you.

Respectfully,



Jonathan Nez, *President*
THE NAVAJO NATION



Myron Lizer, *Vice President*
THE NAVAJO NATION

cc: NM Congressional Delegation
AZ Congressional Delegation
UT Congressional Delegation
CO Congressional Delegation
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