

**House Resources Committee Hearing on H.R.5780
Utah Public Lands Initiative Act
September 14, 2016
San Juan County Commissioner Rebecca Benally**

We are here today to talk about the Utah Public Lands Initiative Act, the PLI.

As a Diné woman, a Navajo woman, and the first to ever serve as a San Juan County Commissioner I want to say, that despite what others have said, the PLI has been a process that has included all San Juan County residents.

The PLI specifically benefits the grassroots residents of San Juan County. It benefits the Utah Navajos with mineral rights on McCracken Mesa, and allows the White Mesa Utes the continued use of their Alloted Lands and community cemetery.

I became a Commissioner to represent my people, to protect the interests of my community. I consider it a sacred duty to speak on their behalf.

That is why I am here today.

My constituents are Utah Navajos who have historically been forgotten or bullied by both the federal government and their own tribe. Now so-called environmentalists and their corporate benefactors are adding their own chapter to this sad story, using a few members of our community who are desperate for a paycheck to advance the agenda of outside interests.

Bears Ears National Monument campaign is a cynical political stunt that, if successful, will deny grass roots Utah Navajos access to their sacred and spiritual grounds.

Traditional Utah Navajo people depend on that land for their necessities of life: to gather medicinal plants, fire wood, piñon nuts, as well as to hunt and practice sacred ceremonies.

Traditional Utah Navajo people are not conspiring with lawyers in board rooms in Salt Lake City and San Francisco. Traditional Utah Navajo people are not collecting \$20 million from the Hewlett and Packard foundations and Leonardo De Caprio to sponsor this toxic divide-and-conquer campaign. Traditional Utah Navajo people are not magazine environmentalists but are real stewards of the land whose interests will be destroyed by a Bears Ears National Monument.

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Grassroots Utah Navajo people do not support this effort to convert our sacred lands into a federal designation that will subjugate them to micromanagement by bureaucrats in Washington DC.

The Bears Ears Monument men claim the federal government will allow us to have continued access to our sacred lands. "Trust us," they say. In the interest of time, I will give you just two reasons why we should not:

1. Canyon de Chelly: Since becoming a national monument, Canyon de Chelly has been raided by the National Park Service (NPS). NPS has removed more than 300 sets of ancestral remains and cultural artifacts. The Navajo Nation has been tied up in a lawsuit since the 1990's to regain custody of those sacred remains from NPS because the Department of Interior continues to defend that action.
2. Little Colorado River Valley: Since becoming the Wupatki National Monument, Navajos lost access to the Little Colorado River Valley. After generations of herding sheep there, Navajo were told by NPS that environmental concerns took priority over Native access to lands that Navajo families had managed since the 1870's. The National Monument designation systematically eliminated Navajos from this land. Today, what was once a thriving community of hundreds of Navajo is a wasteland of abandoned homesteads, home only to a single Navajo elder woman whose house will revert to federal ownership upon her death.

Trusting the federal government, especially agencies within the Dept. of Interior, has not worked out well for the Navajo people. If history is our guide, we would be crazy to do so again and expect a different result. 200 years of broken promises should tell us all we need to know.

Honorable Members of this Committee, Native American support for the Bears Ears Monument campaign is a sham. I am here to help you unmask it. I beg this Congress, this Administration, and the next President of the United States to stop what has become the most cynical divide-and-conquer campaign waged by outside interests against Navajo people since the Navajo-Hopi relocation.

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I support the PLI. It has unified the residents of San Juan County: the Navajo, White Mesa Utes, San Juan Paiutes, Anglo, Hispanic, etc. We are of one mind and one voice when we say “No National Monument.”