

Spotlight on Navajo Nation and the Nexus of Coronavirus and Water

Editor's Note: The following is a transcription of the panelists' remarks made at the conference. No follow-up was made with the panelists and the editor assumes responsibility for any transcription or editing errors.



Moderated by Crystal Tulley-Cordova, Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources

Crystal Tulley-Cordova is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation. She is a principal hydrologist in the Water Management Branch of the Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources. She has a doctoral degree in geology and an interdisciplinary graduate certificate in sustainability from the University of Utah. She has a Master of Water Resources in hydro science and a Bachelor of Science in earth and planetary sciences from The University of New Mexico. Crystal hopes the knowledge and experiences she gained over the years will help her assist Navajo communities to use their current knowledge about water to build sustainable water projects, seek funding for water-related research, and protect and manage water resources across the Navajo Nation.

Yā'at'ééh. Shí éí Crystal Tulley-Cordova yinishyé [speaking in Navajo]. Thank you for this opportunity to participate in this event today. It's important that I identify myself by presenting my clans for the Navajo leadership who are in the audience. To give a brief background: the Navajo Nation spans over 27,000 square miles in the Four Corners region of the United States. It is the largest land-based tribe and the second largest populated tribe. In 2010, over 332,000 Navajos lived throughout the United States. Of the 332,000, over 173,000 Navajos lived on the Navajo Nation, according to the Census count.

It's important for us today to be able to evaluate the nexus between COVID-19 and water. In many media outlets, you have read and heard many stories about the nexus between COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation and the lack of water infrastructure. However, the quantified studies related to evaluating socioeconomic factors as well as looking at energy, food, and water (namely, household drinking water access) are still ongoing. It's important that although these challenges have been brought on by COVID-19, there have also been opportunities that have been created that include research opportunities, like the ones that are ongoing now, and others through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act. Throughout this time, we've created and strengthened relationships and partnerships with academic, state, and federal entities and nongovernmental organizations.

This afternoon, you will hear a variety of perspectives. We are pleased to be able to have our president, Jonathan Nez, speak, and we also have on the panel Delegate Amber Kanazbah Crotty, who is representing the chapters of Cove, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills, Red Valley, Sheepsprings, Beclabito, Tse'alnaotz'i'i, and Gadiiahi/To'Koi. We also have Mark Begay, who is a chapter leader. He's a community leader and well operator in his community of To'Hajiilee. We also have Captain David Harvey from the Indian Health Service (IHS). We have 30 minutes for this panel discussion, and so I ask that the panelists be brief in their comments to these questions. If we have time available, we will be open to questions from the audience. I would also like to encourage you to stay for an interactive breakout session. We will break out into four different groups to be able to see how we can build tribal water capacity through different partnerships with nongovernmental organizations, led by Emma Robbins, and with academic institutions, led by Nikki Tulley from the University of Arizona. One group, led by Captain David Harvey, will look at federal relationships and how those can be strengthened. The tribal community's aspect will be led by Dr. Lani Tsinnajinnie from The University of New Mexico.

Now we'll go ahead and start with President Nez. The first question is: what are some examples of short- and long-term water-related responses you have been a part of to address COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation?



Jonathan Nez, President of the Navajo Nation

Jonathan Nez currently serves as the President of the Navajo Nation. He was born in Tuba City, Arizona, and raised in Shonto, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation. He is married to Phefelia Herbert-Nez and they have two children, Christopher and Alexander. He is the son of John H. Nez and Mabel H. Nez. His grandfather, H.T. Donald, was the former Navajo Nation Council Delegate for Shonto, and his grandmother was Mae Donald from Shonto.

President Nez is of the Áshjiihí Clan (Salt People) and born for the Ta'neezahnii Clan (Tangle clan). His maternal grandfather's clan is Tódich'ii'nii Clan (Bitter Water Clan) and his paternal grandfather's clan is the Táchii'nii Clan (Red-Running-Into-The-Water Clan).

Jonathan Nez started his term as president of the Navajo Nation on January 15, 2019. He also previously served as Vice President of the Navajo Nation from 2015 through the end of 2018, and as the Shonto Chapter Vice President, an elected member of the Navajo Nation Council representing the chapters of Shonto, Oljato, Tsah Bi Kin and Navajo Mountain, Navajo County Board of Supervisor for District 1, and Vice President of the Navajo Nation. President Nez holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science and a Masters of Public Administration, both from Northern Arizona University

Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you, Dr. Tulley-Cordova, Sam, and everyone for putting on this water conference. It was good to hear from my good friend, Senator Udall, a previous panelist. Thank you for the question.

What has transpired through this pandemic has enlightened, or reengaged, the partnership to begin to provide clean water to our Navajo citizens, with the national media attention that tribes including the Navajo Nation, have received. Around 30 to 40 percent of our Navajo people do not have running water, and so that is a major concern, especially now that we are in election season. By this, I mean we are using the national media attention to remind our federal partners that there were promises made when we signed treaties with the federal government. I appreciate Emma Robbins, who is with DigDeep, being on the call and part of this conference. DigDeep is a very good example of a nonprofit partner. I call them friends of the Navajo Nation, who help provide clean drinking water and livestock water (we're in a drought right now) to major communities and small rural communities throughout the Navajo Nation.

Short and long-term water-related responses: I don't think we can distinguish them. The long-term is trying to get running water to the 30 to 40 percent of our citizens that don't have it, and right now, what we have are some funds that have come from the federal government. We're utilizing those CARES Act dollars to put some major infrastructure projects here on the Navajo Nation, and I do have an update. With the CARES Act funding, over \$130 million was set aside from the \$714 million to develop water infrastructure and to hook up homes to the major

trunk lines in our area. If you want to call that the short-term, that's the short-term. Regarding the major trunk lines, we just recently celebrated the opening of the Cutter Lateral, which is the result of the Navajo Nation San Juan Water Rights Settlement and part of the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project. There are two laterals: one is the Cutter Lateral coming from the Cutter Dam, and the other is the San Juan Lateral. The Cutter Lateral just opened and it took a lot of time to get water into those communities on the eastern part of the Navajo Nation. I'm happy to report today that it was turned on. So, there is now water going into these rural communities. As many of you may know, if you have driven between Gallup and Shiprock, the pipes for the San Juan Lateral are being placed into the ground to bring water from the San Juan River into Gallup. So, the next process is to branch that off and provide water to homes and use it for economic development. Building the laterals was a major milestone. That same model can be used in the Western Navajo Pipeline.

There are many examples of projects that we've been a part of. I have been a part of the Manymules Waterline Project up on top of Black Mesa, and then, of course, the Western Navajo Pipeline. We're praying that with a new direction, a new administration, one day we'll have the new Navajo-Ute Water Rights Settlement Act in place to bring water into the Ute portion of the Navajo Nation.

That was quick, but I don't want to take too much time. I know there are many questions, but those are things that we're working on right now, short-term and long-term. I think they are one and the same for us here on the Navajo Nation. Thank you.



David Harvey, Indian Health Service

Capt. David Harvey is a Commissioned Officer of the U.S. Public Health Service and is currently assigned to the Indian Health Service as the Deputy Director of the Division of Sanitation Facilities Construction (SFC). He provides leadership and oversight on data generated, guidelines, and interagency coordination for an environmental health program supporting American Indian, and Alaska Native Tribes with needs identification; and then, the planning, design, and construction of water, wastewater, and solid waste facilities. Nationally, the SFC Program employs a professional, technical, and administrative staff of over 500 individuals; and in FY 2021, the program has been appropriated over \$300 million in funding for the construction of \$3.1 billion for sanitation facilities from identified needs.

In April 2020, CAPT Harvey co-led the formation of the, Navajo Nation COVID-19 Water Access Coordination Group (WACG), with the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development. The mission was to increase access to quality water to mitigate the spread of the virus across the Navajo Nation, which was experiencing high incidences of infections, and was estimated in April 2020 to have had over 9,600 homes with no access to piped water, representing over 20% of the population on the Navajo Nation.

The WACG includes members from the Navajo Nation Government, Navajo Nation Utility and Construction Authorities, U.S. federal government, and non-profit organizations. The WACG is focused on identifying, acquiring, prioritizing, and using available resources to increase access to quality water for tribal homes using data to identify and design interventions.

CAPT Harvey is a registered Professional Engineer in the State of Maine. He also holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Maine, a Master of Science degree from the University of Connecticut, both in Civil Engineering, and a Master of Public Health degree from Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. In 2019, he was named by Johns Hopkins University as a Bloomberg American Health Initiative Fellow, and is currently pursuing a Doctor of Public Health Degree.

Thank you, Dr. Cordova. Thank you, everyone, for inviting me here. It's an honor to be part of a distinguished panel like this today. I've been involved in helping to facilitate partnerships between the Indian Health Service (IHS) in the Navajo Nation and other federal agencies, universities, and nonprofit organizations to address the water-related needs on the Navajo through the 22-member Navajo Nation COVID-19 Water Access Coordination Group. This group is co-led by the IHS and the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development and has been meeting on a regular basis to collaborate on emergency water access response needs and to develop long-term solutions guided by research to address the household lack of water access. The group has assisted

with developing recommendations to the Navajo Nation for emergency actions to increase water access to homes with no private water. It has streamlined the reviews and funding document approval to ensure funds were quickly available to take action from the IHS CARES Act funds. It has also identified external resources for staffing and funding to support public communication regarding the projects external to the CARES Act funds. In addition, it has created a venue for universities to share ideas around current and future water research, both to evaluate the mission outcomes and to examine other water-related issues in order to promote knowledge and recommendations toward addressing long-term actions to improve water access.



Mark Begay, To'Hajiilee Chapter President

Mark Begay is a dedicated leader and Marine Corps veteran who serves as the President of the To'Hajiilee Chapter, a satellite community of the Navajo Nation located 24 miles west of Albuquerque. He has been instrumental in addressing the community's critical water issues, advocating for the construction of a 7.3-mile water pipeline to bring fresh water to To'Hajiilee. His efforts have included negotiating easements with private landowners and collaborating with engineers and local authorities.

Begay's leadership has been marked by his commitment to ensuring a sustainable future for To'Hajiilee residents, particularly during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. His vision and perseverance have brought hope to the community, aiming to replace the aging and unreliable water system with a more dependable solution.

Thank you for inviting me. It's an honor to be here at the 65th Annual New Mexico Water Conference. I want to thank honorable President Nez for joining us today and all the participants. Regarding short-term water projects, we've been working with the Centers for Disease Control. They helped us set up a watering point beside the chapter house. As part of the CARES Act that the president just mentioned, seven homes far from the trunk line are going to receive cisterns. They're supposed to be out there today evaluating the homes, but because of the weather, they had to reschedule. I want to thank the IHS for that effort.

As for long-term water projects, we're having a lot of water issues out there and we're working on the long-term solution. As you read in the newspaper and social media, To'Hajiilee has an ongoing water crisis. Within the last five years, we had three outages because the water has an elevated number of secondary contaminants including iron sulfate and hydrogen sulfate. Due to the contaminants, the water has a bad taste and odor, and it is also very corrosive. It degrades the metallic components of our wells.

In To'Hajiilee, like in many small communities across New Mexico, we are facing an unprecedented public health crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic. The difference is that To'Hajiilee may soon have to fight this pandemic without one of the most basic weapons in our arsenal: safe drinking water. Right now, 10 percent of our individuals are testing positive. That means three to five out of 50 tests are positive. Our community has six wells, but five of them have been abandoned because the groundwater is so corrosive that it eats up the well from the inside. Our last remaining well, well number five, has failed three times, and when that happens people must haul water, the school closes, and the health clinic closes until the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority sends an emergency tanker truck. I'll say that again: the health clinic closes when there's no water. It's just a matter of time before it fails again. But if we do not have a water supply online when that happens, the 2,000 people who live here will be without water.

We have analyzed all these options. The best way is to build a pipeline from Albuquerque through the CARES Act. Thanks to the Navajo Nation, we were able to secure \$2 million for our easement. We have three property owners that are involved, and two of them are willing to let us have an easement, but the third one is Western Albuquerque Land Holdings. Their land manager is Garrett Development Corporation. They're the only ones standing in our way of having this future water supply for To'Hajiilee. Thank you.

Tulley-Cordova: Thank you, Mr. Begay. We'll go to the last question: What are some successes that you have experienced during the pandemic that could benefit future work happening in the communities you represent, President Nez?

President Nez: I want to mention again what Captain Harvey said earlier about the partnership of the Navajo Nation and the IHS's COVID-19 water access mission. There are over 20 partners collaborating on getting this funding spent by December 30, 2020. That's a monumental task that we have, especially when it comes to \$714 million. There is other funding that went to other federal agencies, and \$5 million of IHS's CARES Act allocation went to this project. I am inspired to see this type of federal partnership happening, where you get 37,000 water storage containers going out to our citizens across the Navajo Nation. As you know, we're in a drought right now. I visited a few of the water access points where we have been handing out food, water, and hygiene kits throughout our Navajo Nation and the only issue I've been told about was that the water hoses were a little smaller compared to the big water hoses citizens use. These hoses are used for clean drinking water that's being set up for the Navajo people. These transitional watering points can serve over 12,000 people in that region. They don't have to haul water from 20, 30, 40 miles away. It gets a little closer now for a lot of our people, and we're looking

forward to the continuation of that partnership. I think that's a success story that we need to highlight, especially when collaboration between two federal agencies (IHS and Bureau of Indian Affairs) and the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development facilitated these discussions

that have brought water closer to our Navajo people. So, that sets us up now and for any type of infrastructure bill that may be coming through the pipes from the federal government after the election or during the next congressional sessions. Thank you, Dr. Cordova.



Amber Kanazbah Crotty, Navajo Nation Council Delegate

Amber Kanazbah Crotty is a dedicated member of the 24th Navajo Nation Council. She represents the districts of Beclabito, Cove, Gad Íí'áhí, Red Valley, Tooh Haltsooi, Two Grey Hills, and Tsé Alnáozt'i'í. As a council delegate, she serves on the Budget and Finance Committee and the Naabik'iyáti' Sexual Assault Prevention Subcommittee.

Amber is known for her work in strengthening responses to sexual violence, improving data sharing and cross-deputation with outside agencies, and enhancing sexual assault laws on the Navajo Nation. She is of the Kinyaa'aanii Clan, with her maternal grandfather being Deeshchii'nii, and she hails from Tó Halstooí (Sheep Springs, NM).

In addition to her legislative work, Amber advocates for various vulnerable groups, including domestic violence victims, sexual assault survivors, LGBTQ2Si individuals, and those facing mental health issues. She is a strong proponent of the principle "Alchíní bá a'nít'á – Do it for the Children."

Tulley-Cordova: We will now proceed with Amber Kanazbah Crotty. The question is, what are some successes that you have experienced during the pandemic that could benefit future work happening in your community?

Kanazbah Crotty: Thank you for the question. In terms of some of the successes is the need, the absolute need, for data-driven decision-making. What we've seen in the past, especially when it comes to water and working with our federal partners at IHS and our Navajo Nation partners, is when we do this prioritized listing we know that IHS has a funding formula that just doesn't work for our communities. It is not only a matter of having Congressional leadership fix those federal funding requirements but also a matter of empowering the communities at the chapter level. As nonprofits move in, as chapter leadership comes in, we are doing those individual assessments. Now we know there are new homes, so we're building up a database to fill in the gaps in IHS's information. It's bringing in this knowledge from our Navajos in the private sector and developing a dynamic intersection towards a future in which it's not enough just to have clean water as a human right. Now I'm working with the Army Corps of Engineers. They're doing a watershed study for my district. They'll also be helping us along Highway 491, identifying the areas that we need to manage as we build this lateral pipeline. For all nonprofits online, I appreciate your service. I recognize that the Navajo Nation government is not the easiest to

work with, but hang in there. You're doing good work. *Ahéhee'.*

Tulley-Cordova: Thank you, Delegate Crotty. Captain Harvey?

Harvey: Thank you, President Nez, for acknowledging the hard work of the Water Access Coordination Group and the efforts we put out there. We have run some numbers over the short distances that we've created because of the installation of these points. Initially, it was around 52-miles roundtrip that people living in the 59 chapters without a permanent water source would have to travel, and now it's down to 17. So, we've reduced the trip by 35 miles, which is a significant outcome. The key to that success was the collaboration of that over 20-member Navajo Nation COVID-19 Water Access Coordination Group, but also to establishing clear goals and objectives upfront. The Centers for Disease Control assisted with that when they were first invited to participate by President Nez and Vice President Lizer. We set a clear vision and goals with the group, and we worked through them.

We've also developed communication projects about products that are locally focused, including Navajo-language translations of information that are available on the website. We are currently still recording some of that information so that it can be available to access on the Navajo Safe Water website (<https://navajo-safe-water-2-navajosafewater.hub.arcgis.com/>) as well. I believe that

communication has brought the community to buy-in. The tremendous support by chapter leaders has been seen by the IHS field teams. These teams have been very successful in connecting with leaders to get input on the intervention, provide one-on-one training and to answer questions about how to work with the intervention even during the difficult times of COVID-19. So, those are great successes in overcoming great challenges and I'm honored to be part of that.

Tulley-Cordova: Thank you for that, Captain Harvey. Mr. Begay, we'll end with comments from you. What are some of the successes that you've experienced during during the pandemic that can help you with your future efforts post-pandemic to help your community?

Begay: One of the successes before the pandemic hit was a To'Hajiilee water improvement project with the collaboration of the Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources, our engineers, Souder, Miller & Associates, IHS and other different entities. We're very grateful to the Tribal Infrastructure Funds (TIF). New Mexico is the only state that has that source available to Indian communities. And thank you to Lynn Trujillo, our state representative, and our Navajo Nation leaders. We were able to do a preliminary engineering report, funded through TIF, which

included To'Hajiilee water improvements, Albuquerque-To'Hajiilee water transmission, and all the as-built. One of the things happening in To'Hajiilee was that our pipes were so outdated. I'm happy to say one of the big successes was that we went through the planning stage, the design stage, and now, finally, we're in the construction phase. We just recently picked a contractor. MBS Construction is going to perform almost \$3 million worth of much-needed upgrades in our water system. Also, eight miles of our main line with six-inch asbestos cement is going to be replaced. As you know, it's a health hazard if you're working on it, and you must have different ways of protecting yourself. In addition, we received \$500,000 in funding for our project from the CARES Act. There are so many things to talk about, but we're short on time. So, I want to thank everybody here. We're doing our best in To'Hajiilee, and as a final thought, we really need our clinic expanded. It's getting too small. We're doing a lot of testing here and we're trying to control the virus. Thank you again.

Tulley-Cordova: Thank you for that, Mr. Begay. I hope today our participants had the opportunity to listen to community, executive, and legislative perspectives on the nexus between COVID-19 and water on the Navajo Nation, and how we've been able to work collaboratively on many projects in challenging times.