

NAVAJO TIMES

DINÉ BI NAALTSOOS

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NTUA returns \$34M for Hardship Assistance

FORT DEFIANCE – The Navajo Tribal Utility Authority will return \$34 million of unspent CARES Act funds to the Navajo Nation with the understanding that it will be reverted to the Hardship Assistance Fund to help families, according to a Tuesday NTUA news release.

“Since August, NTUA has focused on completing as many of the CARES Act-funded projects as possible before the Navajo Nation’s Dec. 30, 2020, deadline,” said NTUA General Manager Walter Haase.

“With the trust and support of tribal leadership, we put together a list of utility projects we thought we could complete by Dec. 30. We worked extremely hard to do as much as possible to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

“During all this, we heard the public concern regarding Hardship funding,” he added, “therefore, we believe we should do our part by evaluating all NTUA CARES Act projects on a weekly basis and return unspent funds without question.”

The Navajo Nation Council provided \$147 million to fund NTUA utility projects – \$30 million for electric power line projects and capacity upgrades, \$35 million for photovoltaic off-grid solar units, \$18 million for water and wastewater projects, \$20 million for water cistern systems, and \$32 million for broadband expansion projects.

In mid-August 2020, NTUA accepted the responsibility of extending, building and connecting utilities to families to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. NTUA organized internally and prepared for expedited work.

In less than 20 weeks, the homes of 719 families on the Navajo Nation were connected to the electric grid.

NTUA dispatched its own crews and they were able to connect 665 homes. In addition, NTUA shared its CARES Act funding with neighboring utilities to extend electricity to 54 homes that were located close to the power lines of those utilities.

All 300 of the off-grid residential solar units were released to vendors for placement at homes. When completed over 1,000 families will receive a power source to light up their homes.

With the funds awarded, three telecommunications towers were built, 42 free Wi-Fi hotspots were activated, and 82 internet broadcast stations were completed.

Repairs and upgrades to six public water-loading stations have been completed, nine new water-loading stations have been set up, and 5 separate water loading stations were completed for water hauling for livestock.

In partnership with the Navajo Engineering Construction Authority, 81 out of the 111 planned water cistern, septic and power systems were completed.

Water line connections and septic systems were installed at 30 homes. Renovations were completed on three major regional water tanks.

NTUA is currently working to complete certain projects that were started and encumbered, but were delayed as a result of COVID-19 issues.

“The CARES Act work was a tremendous challenge. Our workforce remained dedicated and moved these projects forward week by week,” Haase said. “We did our best. I am extremely grateful too and proud of the entire workforce and what they were able to accomplish.”