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'This is the future'

Elder's vision comes true with Kayenta Solar Facility

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KAYENTA – Ella Todacheenie knows that her grandchildren are the future. That is why she gave up 300 acres of her grazing land three years ago to let Navajo Tribal Utility Authority cover it with photovoltaic panels to power households, including her own.

"She wanted to be the first one to turn on the lights," said Todacheenie's granddaughter, Vanna Benally. "She'd (shout), 'It's coming!' She was so excited, but she passed on."

The Kayenta Solar Facility was officially dedicated Aug. 23, although it has been producing power since June.

Todacheenie died in August 2015 at the age of 87. According to her granddaughter, she was a warm, generous and kind-hearted woman, who took a moment to look at the faces of her children and grandchildren three years ago when NTUA officials knocked on her door asking for land.

The faces of her children spoke volumes of her past, present and the promise and peril of their future.

"This might be the start for the future, for our grandchildren," Todacheenie told her grandchildren at that time.

That was the reason why she gave up her land, said Benally.

Meeting with NTUA officials on that occasion, Ella Todacheenie and her children – Mary Benally, John Todacheenie, Bruce Todacheenie, Amos Noelson, and Franklin Todacheenie – signed an agreement to hand over land on which she had herded sheep and goats.

"This was where we gathered cows and horses to brand," Vanna Benally explained.

"And we herded sheep and goats," said Wilford Benally, the grandson of Ella Todacheenie.

A family cornfield is nearby as well, said Vanna Benally, adding that her grandmother was also a stargazer and a well-known individual in the community.

"She knew that this land was just sitting here and she knew it would be better than a power plant emitting pollution," Wilford Benally explained.

Thanks to Ella Todacheenie and her family, the Navajo Nation has plugged into the sun at the recently developed Kayenta Solar Facility.

But it was no easy feat for NTUA officials who were turned down by a number of Navajo communities. However, they never gave up looking for a community willing to accept photovoltaic panels covering a portion of their land.

"We tried to set this project in motion," explained Walter Haase, general manager for NTUA, "spending time in several communities. We actually spent a year going to different communities throughout the Navajo Nation that have access to transmission interconnections. Unfortunately we kept getting turned away by those communities."

The Kayenta Solar Facility is a 27.3-megawatt power plant. It is so beautiful that the Todacheenie family says it looks like a body of water.

"We like it, it looks like water," Vanna Benally said. "When we're on the ridge (nearby), we say, 'Oh, look at that big lake.'"

"And at night, the moon shines on it like it would shine on a lake," Wilford Benally added.

One hundred ninety-seven acres of PV panels are lined up in long troughs like canals of light, according to Derrick Terry, renewable energy specialist for NTUA. All 120,000 panels follow the sun every morning and create enough electricity for nearly 8,000 homes.

NTUA broke ground just north of here in late April 2016 when leaders and lawmakers placed their shovels into the ground and turned over a piece of earth, setting a new foundation.

"That new foundation took shape," Haase said, "and everybody can see what has happened in the backdrop from that foundation. And it really was a paradigm shift that has changed for the Navajo people."

"It was the very first time in the history of the Navajo Nation that the Navajo people owned a power plant of any kind – at all," Haase continued.

"It's also important to note that the relationship the Navajo people have with the earth and just nature in general, and this is one of the better methodologies to produce electricity with that relationship."

Haase said this is the first time that a project like this came about from start to finish.

"We've done something very unique and different that hasn't been done with any other transmission company in the United States where we were allowed to use our existing rights," Haase said, "to feed this power to our existing customers along our path. That allows a very unique

relationship because that allows us to have a competitive price with SRP (Salt River Project). That's very exciting."

Five members of the Todacheenie family live close by the solar facility, according to Haase. All five will be connecting to the electrical grid by Thanksgiving.

"Even though they didn't have electricity, they saw the vision and understood what it meant for the rest of the Navajo people, the Kayenta community, the government itself, and saw fit to allow us to have the land," Haase added, "which is a rare event."

The Kayenta Solar Facility was built in 10 months and provided 278 jobs for Diné men and women who were paid out of a \$10 million-plus payroll.

"The actual plant itself gave \$5.2 million in direct salaries to Navajo during that 10-month period," Haase explained. "So that was about \$15 million that was given back directly by result of the project, which is an extremely large number, and an important number for a community the size of Kayenta."

President Russell Begaye said he is grateful for such utopian fuel – limitless, ubiquitous, and clean.

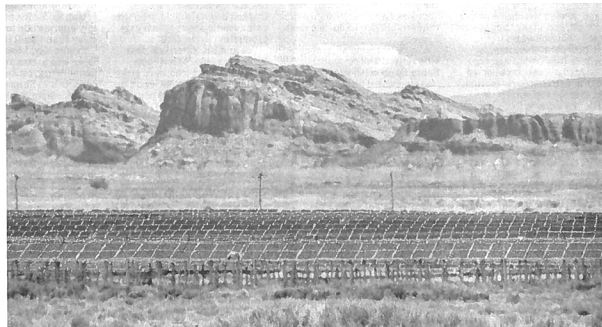
"We're excited," Begaye said. "Our people have been asking for renewable energy of some form, either solar or wind. We just couldn't make it happen for various reasons."

Begaye said the biggest reason why the Navajo Nation never had a solar or wind farm is because the Diné did not have a vision and a passion for it.

"They were not convinced enough that we needed this," he said. "That we needed something like this and more of it. This is the beginning. This is just one step. So we're going to see our Nation move more and more toward renewable energy."

When asked what her grandmother would have said about the PV panels covering her old grazing land, Vanna Benally shouted, "There's water here!"

"Maybe she foresaw it, we don't know," Vanna Benally added, "because she used to say, 'There's water everywhere. There's no smoke, no pollution, this is the future.'"



The Kayenta Solar Facility, located just north of Tódlínéshzhee, gleams through the haze of heat on Aug. 24. The 27.3-megawatt plant is the first solar facility on the Navajo Nation.

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