



The Navajo Nation
Yideeskáądi Nitsáhákees

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Navajo President Buu Nygren asks NASA to delay January moon launch to consult with Nation, respect traditional beliefs

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren has asked NASA and the federal Transportation Dept. to consult with the Navajo Nation before sending human remains to the moon next year.

In a Dec. 21 letter to Transportation Dept. Secretary Pete Buttigieg, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson, and Transportation Assistant Secretary for Tribal Government Affairs Arlando Teller, the President expressed what he called “our deep concern and profound disappointment regarding a matter of utmost importance.”

He wrote that the Navajo Nation was recently made aware of the planned Jan. 8, 2024, launch of the Vulcan Centaur carrying the Peregrine Mission One by Astrobotic Technology.

Among 28 payloads, he said, are some by “Celestis and Elysium Space, companies known for providing memorial services by shipping human cremated remains.”

In his letter, President Nygren asked that the launch be delayed and immediate consultation take place.

“We believe that both NASA and the USDOT should have engaged in consultation with us before agreeing to contract with a company that transports human remains to the Moon or authorizing a launch carrying such payloads,” he wrote.

“The Moon holds a sacred position in many Indigenous cultures. The act of depositing human remains on the Moon is tantamount to desecration of this sacred space.”

– Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren

He said this situation “echoes back to the late 1990s, when the National Aeronautics and Space Administration sent the Lunar Prospector, carrying the remains of (former astronaut) Eugene Shoemaker, to the Moon.”

“At the time, Navajo Nation President Albert Hale voiced our objections regarding this action. In response, NASA issued a formal apology and promised consultation with tribes before authorizing any further missions carrying human remains to the Moon,” President Nygren wrote.

Yet, from the information the Navajo Nation has received, NASA is not upholding its commitment, he said.

In January 1998, the late President Hale said he was appalled to learn that human remains were being sent to the moon.

“The moon is revered, and it regulates life cycles, according to Navajo traditions and stories,” President Hale said. “To send something like that over there is sacrilege.”

The late President Hale said such an action to place human remains on the moon was gross insensitivity to the beliefs of many Native Americans.

President Nygren wrote that it appeared the Office of Commercial Space, under the U.S. Department of Transportation, failed to engage in consultation with tribes prior to issuing the payload certificate for this launch.

“It is crucial to emphasize that the Moon holds a sacred position in many Indigenous cultures, including ours,” President Nygren wrote. “We view it as a part of our spiritual heritage, an object of reverence and respect. The act of depositing human remains and other materials, which could be perceived as discards in any other location, on the Moon is tantamount to desecration of this sacred space.”

He said NASA has previously committed to consultation with the Navajo Nation and that the Biden Administration has recently promised to consult on matters that impact tribes, in accordance with the Jan. 26, 2021, Memorandum on Tribal Consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships.

“This memorandum reinforced the commitment to Executive Order 13175 of November 6, 2000,” President Nygren wrote. “Additionally, the Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Interagency Coordination and Collaboration for the Protection of Indigenous Sacred Sites, which you and several other members of the Administration signed in November 2021, further underscores the requirement for such consultation.”

He said this explicitly recognizes that sacred sites can consist of “places that afford views of important areas of land, water, or of the sky and celestial bodies.”

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