



Deb Haaland's visit home: Grandparents' prayers

ALIYAH CHAVEZ · APR 6, 2021

U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland listens to tribal leaders during a round-table discussion at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on Tuesday, April 6, 2021. The visit marked Haaland's first to her home state after being confirmed as head of the federal agency, making her the first Native American to hold a Cabinet position. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)

The former Congress member returns home in her first official trip as head of the U.S. Department of the Interior, meets with pueblo leaders

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[Indian Country Today](#)

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland listened to the concerns of various pueblo governors then vowed for a “new era” in working with tribes, adding President Joe Biden has a shared commitment to restore the nation-to-nation relationship.

Haaland’s first business trip away from the nation’s capital Tuesday included a listening session with a delegation of nine pueblo governors of the All Pueblo Council of Governors at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The two-and-a-half-hour event was an infrequent opportunity for pueblo leaders to get the ear of top ranking officials including New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, U.S. Sens. Martin Heinrich and Ben Ray Lujan and Rep. Teresa Leger Fernandez who were in attendance.

Former Cochiti Pueblo Gov. Regis Pecos described the meeting as a “profoundly defining moment.”

"Their availability to have this kind of really frank and honest discussion is something I've not seen in my 40 years of work in this area," added Pecos, who has worked in various capacities for the New Mexico legislature.

The governors expressed concerns about water rights, returning sacred objects, COVID-19 recovery, the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and a hope for tribes to be consulted on issues, among other topics.

One priority for the governors was the protection of the Chaco Culture National Historical Park in northwestern New Mexico. They said they are frustrated that the U.S. Bureau of Land Management hasn't done more to stem oil and gas development.

Gov. Brian Vallo of Acoma Pueblo shared the gathering was the first time some governors left their reservations, citing the occasion was only his fourth business trip out of Acoma since March 2020. Many of the pueblos closed their communities to visitors during the pandemic, even to those who are citizens of their own communities.

"For us to come together like this was a rare opportunity, but one that was a ceremony in itself," Vallo said.

The event was held in an outdoor courtyard and everyone wore masks. Still, Vallo said, many were cautious because COVID-19 disproportionately impacted pueblo nations in New Mexico. Two of which had the [highest infection in the country](#), surpassing New York and the Navajo Nation.

In June 2020, statewide data showed Native people making up 54 percent of the total positive cases in New Mexico.

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Several tribal leaders used their remarks to honor the lives of lost religious leaders and elders.

Haaland shared that 80 percent of the Interior employees who died from the coronavirus worked in Indian Affairs, a bureau that is heavily made up of Indigenous employees.

Gov. Jerome Lucero of Zia Pueblo shared he too suffered a severe bout with COVID a year ago. "I thought I was going to die," Lucero said.

Haaland offered condolences to tribal leaders for their losses, and congratulated them on their efforts to get their communities vaccinated.

Many of Haaland's remarks highlighted the American Rescue Plan which provides [more than \\$31 billion in relief](#), marking the single largest investment the U.S. has made in Indian Country.

Zuni Gov. Val Panteah Sr. said he's encouraged that Biden's administration has promised to listen to tribes on how to spend federal virus relief funding and on protecting places like Bears Ears National Monument in southern Utah. Haaland is expected to visit the monument later this week.

Other parts of the conversation served as "coming home" for Haaland.

"Today you return home, a symbol of our fulfillment of our faith, the answer to the prayers of our grandmothers and grandfathers over many generations," said the All Pueblo Council of Governors Chairman Wilfred Herrera Jr. who is former governor of Laguna. "That prophetic time has come in our time and we are grateful," Herrera Jr. said as Haaland wiped tears.

Every pueblo governor in attendance began their remarks in their Native languages to offer prayers or words of encouragement for Haaland.

"Where else can you have that kind of depth of expression that is purely unique to this moment of having a Native person in this capacity?" Pecos said after the event.

"That to me captured how monumental and unique this opportunity is," Pecos said. "It was an emotional moment for me to hear how pueblo leaders communicated with the Secretary of the Interior like that."

Tribes' expectations of Haaland, Laguna and Jemez Pueblos, are wide-ranging, rooted in the federal government's past failures to uphold responsibilities etched in treaties and other acts. While many are hopeful her appointment will open the door to new possibilities, they acknowledge it will take time to address the systemic problems that have plagued their communities for generations.

After hearing the concerns of pueblo governors, Haaland reiterated a shared commitment with the president to restore trust responsibilities.

"I strongly believe that the messaging today from Secretary Haaland ... certainly spoke to this commitment to remain engaged with tribal leadership, not only here in New Mexico, but tribal leaders throughout the country, and that is momentous." Vallo said.

"This is the beginning," Haaland said. "I believe that we have the opportunity of a lifetime to protect our environment and our way of life to give our children opportunities and to build economies for generations to come."

She ended saying "*da'wa'eh*," echoing the sentiment of other pueblo leaders by saying thank you in Keres.

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