



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION ON INDIAN AFFAIRS, INC.

381 FOURTH AVENUE • NEW YORK CITY

FUNDAMENTALS OF THE NAVAJO PROBLEM

The Navajo Tribe with a population of 48,000, constitutes the largest and one of the most vigorous groups of full-blood Indians remaining in the United States. Enabling this important group to find means of adequate self-support, and to progress towards a mutually beneficial adaptation to our society, should be a matter of national interest and concern. Today this tribe is in a desperate predicament, the solution of which is a challenge to America. Yet, for the past ten years or so, there has been so much controversy over both the nature of the situation, and the proposals for bettering it, as to obscure the issue in a truly harmful manner. Protests and quarrels over the administration of health services, day schools, the organization of the Navajo Service, and similar matters have obscured the fundamentals and in many instances caused them to be forgotten.

It is the purpose of this statement, which is based upon investigations carried out by the American Association on Indian Affairs over many years, and reports of government agencies and private groups with which the Association has had close contact, to restate these fundamentals. We do this not only to make our own position clear, but for the information of the public.

I.

Two points must be clearly grasped at the outset of this presentation, in order that the significance of the facts which follow may be fully understood. These are:

1. That the government's surveys and findings on natural resources, developed or latent, herding and farming methods, other sources of income, stock now on the range, and other matters touching the whole economy of the reservation, are substantially correct.
2. That since over 60% of the tribe speaks no English at all, and most of the rest is not equipped in any way to compete for jobs in the white man's world, the time is not in sight when any large numbers of Navajos can go out into the white world. To encourage any of them to do so now, would be merely to drain the tribe of its most competent leaders. In short, the Navajo Tribe is still dependent upon the reservation.

We feel it necessary to state the first point above, because certain extremist opponents of the existing program do deny it. The evidence for the general soundness of the government's findings is overwhelming. The surveys have been conducted continuously since 1930, engaging highly qualified experts of both the Department of the Interior and of Agriculture. The detail and completeness of the documents themselves are convincing. Our own representatives have accompanied some of the parties and checked samples of the data, finding them unusually dependable, and the Committee of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, which went into the matter thoroughly, has nothing but praise for these surveys.

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The second point made above is inescapable on the basis of universally accepted facts.

II.

MAJOR LAND RESOURCES

Average 30 acres per sheep.

1. The Navajo reservation contains 15,000,000 acres of a generally semi-arid, high plateau character.
2. Of this, 270,000* acres carry commercial timber, with a maximum net volume of 328,510,000 board feet, or an annual sustained yield of approximately 13,140,000 board feet.
3. There are now approximately 15,000 acres of irrigated farming land.
4. There are now 30 to 40 thousand acres of other farming land, some of it extremely poor.
5. An additional 30,000 acres of irrigated land can be developed if the necessary appropriations are forthcoming, including 8,000 acres of the Many Farms Project, for which an initial appropriation is carried in the present budget. This does not include the San Juan Project of an estimated 150,000 acres; the enormous cost of this project, and the political complications involved, bar any present likelihood of its being carried out.
6. The greater part of the land that can be used for anything at all is used for grazing. The carrying capacity of the reservation is approximately 540,000 sheep units. (A sheep unit is what one sheep consumes in one year. A cow equals four sheep units, a horse five.) Some of this capacity must be used for the support of horses, necessary for both herding and farming. If it all could be used for sheep, however, it would still suffice for subsistence only for between 25 and 30 thousand Navajos, if divided evenly.
7. In 1933 there were nearly 1,500,000 sheep units on the range. It had been thus overstocked for many years, with the result that destruction of the land and erosion were painfully obvious, and that the time when the land would cease to support any considerable number of sheep was clearly in sight.
8. Today there are 700,000 sheep units on the reservation, or 160,000 in excess of carrying capacity.
9. Under the old, laissez-faire policy, an unduly large part of the common range was monopolized by a few, wealthy, Navajo stockmen.
10. For many years there has been a large number of Navajo families owning no sheep at all,** and another large number owning too few to support themselves primarily by herding.

These facts lead to two conclusions which have at times been obscured by controversy:

First: That stock reduction, begun in 1933, was urgently needed and long overdue, and has not yet been completed. Insofar as reduction cannot be completed by removing worthless stock, the brunt of it must be borne by the large stock owners.

* Preliminary surveys show a possible addition of 120,000 acres of marketable timber.

** Present estimate--2,500 families.

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Second: That grazing being still in excess of carrying capacity, there is no near prospect that the demands made in certain quarters, to allow some Indians to increase their sheep, can be satisfied. It should be noted that in the first stock reduction campaign the government made a serious mistake in not letting the brunt of reduction fall upon the large owners--largely because the large owners outmanoevred it; and the problem of reducing them to their fair share of the range has not yet been solved. The hardships suffered by many of the poorer Navajos as a result of this mistake have resulted in a legacy of distrust and opposition to the government's program.

III.

THE HUMAN CARRYING CAPACITY OF THE RESERVATION

The figures on relief which are given under this heading, bear upon the real potential or present carrying capacity of the reservation only insofar as they show a lack. The need for relief is a proof of inadequacy.

1. The present budget carries an item of \$225,000 for development of the Many Farms Irrigation Project. Under the economy requirements of national defense, it is unlikely that any larger project will be made possible in the immediate future.
2. To some extent the use by the Indians of the lands that have been developed, has been slowed by misunderstandings and failures to consider Navajo attitudes and folkways.
3. This fault is now being largely corrected, resulting in increased occupancy of the improved lands.
4. The preliminary announcement for 1941 by the Bureau of the Census gives the Navajo population on the reservation as 47,447, an increase of about 5,000 in the last ten years, and four times the number in 1870. Even allowing for errors in the census taking, the rate of increase is alarming.
5. Even when and if all possible farming land is developed (excepting the San Juan Project, which, as was pointed out, cannot be realized for years) it is doubtful if the whole present population, without allowing for increase, can live upon the land by the traditional methods of farming and herding.
6. The only politically possible extension of the Navajo reservation is to the eastward in New Mexico, in country already occupied by all the Navajos and all the sheep it can carry.
7. With one-third of tribal income derived from government wages including C. C. C. and other work-relief, the direct relief roll for the past year has fluctuated between four and ten thousand persons--eight to twenty percent of the tribe.

IV.

OTHER SOURCES OF INCOME

The Navajos have always had some supporting income from sources such as silversmithing, weaving, and miscellaneous wages. The best available figures on these are for 1936, when they totalled \$675,270 or 13.4% of the total income.

11000/50000
450 per family

134/675270 (5000000)

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The weaving and silversmithing incomes have not increased since that year, although it is generally acknowledged that material increase is possible. The traders have not developed any new markets in recent years, and so far the efforts of the Arts and Crafts Board, which included the introduction of the government hall-mark, have also failed. The possibilities of a Navajo Guild are being explored, but it is too early to tell how well this will work.

The best established new enterprise is the Tribal Lumbering Operation. Loggers, truckers, sawmill workers, etc., are Indians save for a few superintendents. This enterprise makes cheap lumber available for the tribe, and at present provides jobs for 110 Navajos, which means that it supports some 400 individuals. If the outside sales can be secured which will enable the enterprise to run at full capacity of 15,000,000 board feet per year, it will employ about 400 Navajos, thus supporting about 1,600 persons.

The tribal meat cannery and slaughter house mainly cans the meat of non-productive sheep and cattle which should be taken off the range and are bought under the reduction program. Many of these could not be sold commercially. It does also buy a little prime beef and mutton to be consumed fresh. The products are sold to the schools, hospitals, and individual customers, and are issued for relief. It serves another important purpose in providing a market where any beef or mutton animal may be sold at the market price, thus forcing commercial buyers to pay the same. We cannot yet tell how important this enterprise may become.

The tribe is also experimenting with a flour mill in connection with the wheat-raising area in the Chinli Valley. This probably will never create much employment. Its main function is to ensure to the wheat-raising Navajos a proper return for their wheat, and it is hoped, force down the excessive profit which traders now take on the great Navajo staple, flour. We also hope it will induce them to eat whole wheat instead of refined flour.

These different undertakings are run on tribal funds in the tribe's name, but under government direction. In the case of the Cannery and Sawmill, costs of supervision, management, etc. are charged against the projects. The government is also looking now for a man who can teach methods of tanning skins that the Navajos can use under local conditions. This should make some addition to individual income.

These new enterprises are interesting enough, but in considering them we must remember that one-third of the tribal income today is from government wages, which means that somewhere in the neighborhood of 15,000 Indians depend upon it wholly or mainly, and that this year we had a minimum of 4,000 on direct relief--a total of about 19,000 or 38% now supported by the taxpayer.

The logic of all the facts and conclusions considered so far, leads to a further, basic conclusion:

It is doubtful that the fullest development of present plans for farming lands and industries will support all Navajos on the reservation, even if they stop increasing. At best it can provide only a "frozen" situation in which subsistence is assured, but there is no room for individual advancement save for a limited number of promotions to positions as foremen and managers in tribal enterprises and for a few gifted craftsmen. Best situated, perhaps, are the lucky ones who can obtain irrigated land on which they can farm with security and some margin over subsistence.

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V.

THE HEART OF THE CONTROVERSY

The whole of this exposition leads us to the very core of the controversy which has raged over the Navajo program, among both whites and Indians, since its inception in 1933. This lies in the very unpleasant nature of the alternatives with which we have been and are now presented.

If we agree that the Navajos are still dependent upon their reservation, the second basic premise offered at the beginning of this list, we still find that sheep and cattle to support them cannot be run on the reservation without totally destroying it in a relatively short time. We find that there can be farming lands for only a limited number of families. Counting in existing wage workers and 4,000 on direct relief, we find that nearly half the tribe is not now supported by farming or herding, and that means of livelihood for a large part of the remainder have not yet been found. We reach the impasse which has so distressed many people who love these Indians:

If the vast majority of Navajo families were allowed to run flocks of sheep on the reservation large enough to ensure subsistence, the reservation would be destroyed, but no adequate substitute has yet been found to replace this means of livelihood.

The Indian Service has made the governing decision that regardless of all else, the soil must be preserved for the twenty-five thousand-odd Navajos who do now wrest a living from it (and it must be remembered that lumbermen, sawmill and cannery workers, weavers, and others are also dependent upon the products of a healthy land, and furthermore that ruin of this enormous area vitally affects the welfare of the surrounding population).

We find, therefore, that soil conservation and restriction of Navajo livestock to carrying capacity must be continued; but that the government's program must be enlarged beyond the preservation and exploitation of existing resources, to find entirely new means of livelihood for Indians living on the reservation. Not only the government, but this Association and all others interested in the welfare of these citizens, must explore every possibility for developing local industries, as well as increasing the capacity of the land. We must also call upon Congress to continue reasonable appropriations for development of irrigated land, and other enterprises leading towards complete Navajo self-support. The truest economy and the greatest advantage to the United States can be secured by these expenditures, which will keep this self-reliant people permanently off relief.

We believe that a solution to the Navajo problem can be found. To do so will require the collaboration of Congress, administrative agencies, and the interested public. The effort is well worth making: ensuring a future for the Navajo tribe, with its great abilities and capacity for progress, will be not only the minimum of justice to them, but of benefit to the nation.

May 1, 1941

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