

LIFE IN THE BENNETT FREEZE



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Brian Leddy/Independent

Ulalaine Hardy gathers buckets to haul water at her home in Tuba City, Ariz., Nov. 27. Hardy now lives in a bus with her common-law husband after her home burned down several years ago. Hardy's home was on Bennett Freeze land so she has had trouble getting assistance to rebuild.

No magic bus

Forgotten People see no signs of recovery

By Kathy Helms
Diné Bureau

TUBA CITY, Ariz. — Ulalaine Hardy, 45, and Roderick Wagner, who is in his 70s, live in the former Bennett Freeze area. They make their home in a 1974 bus north of Tuba City near the three water tanks. They have no running water, no electricity.

The couple are just two of the nearly 7,000 Navajo people living in the former Bennett Freeze — an area about the size of the state of Delaware where only 3,110 single-family residences are considered habitable.

During the 40-plus years the Bennett Freeze was in effect, it all but stopped development in the nine affected chapters and contributed to poor living conditions for those that chose to remain, according to a December 2008 recovery plan prepared by WHPacific Inc. for the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development.

Many of the residents have lived for years without electricity, plumbing or clean drinking water. One out of three residents drive up to 24 miles every day just to haul water, while others drink livestock water from nearby windmills, some of which are contaminated with



Brian Leddy/Independent

Rod and Ula fix lunch on the bus that serves as their home on the outskirts of Tuba City, Ariz.

bacteria, uranium and arsenic.

Though President Barack Obama signed legislation May 8, officially lifting the Bennett Freeze, and a recovery plan was unveiled a year ago, affected residents say they have seen no difference.

Hardy said that while their bus has tanks for water and sewage, “We have to haul water and bring it in. We have to cook outside sometimes because we don’t have any propane. We’re trying to get a meter pole and a meter so we can get electricity.”

Access to electricity is “right there, convenient, but the water is going to be hard for us because we have to dig a trench like 500 feet” to where Navajo Tribal Utility Authority will install a meter. “It’s hard to get the PVC for that,” she said.

“For most people, I guess, electricity and water is convenient to them and they don’t think about other people who are without. It’s kind of hard for us to talk about it sometimes. You have to just pray and do your best.”

This past summer they earned a living by doing yard work and

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Bennett Freeze at a glance:

- On May 8, President Obama signed Senate Bill 39 into law, permanently rescinding the “Bennett Freeze” and ending more than 40 years of restrictions for Navajo Nation residents living on 1.6 million acres in the western portion of the Navajo Nation.
- The freeze, which was imposed July 8, 1966, by then-Department of the Interior Secretary Robert Bennett, resulted from a decades-long land dispute between the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe and prevented residents from making improvements or repairs to their homes and related property.
- Only 3 percent of families affected by the Bennett Freeze have electricity and only 10 percent have running water.



Brian Leddy/Independent

Roderick Wagner, surveys the landscape at the site where her home burned several years ago. All that remains of her home is the charred metal skeleton.

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other odd jobs. "We get paid \$20 a day, something like that." Hardy has nerve damage in her back but Social Security determined she was well enough to work. "I can't stand for more than four hours. I'm a cook so I have to stand like eight hours a day. It's very hard for me to get a job. We have to work here and there."

Life in the Bennett Freeze area is tough, she said. "Food distribution helps us a lot, but without refrigeration and without a place to really cook anything, it's hard. It would have been harder if we had had kids, living in this condition. It's not that we're lazy to do anything; it's part of life, I guess. You just have to take it one day at a time and live."

The couple have tried before to get assistance from the tribe, but were unsuccessful, according to Hardy. "They said we have to fill out paperwork. Sometimes we don't have a ride so we have to walk to these places. It takes a long time."

"I was on the NHA (Navajo Housing Authority) list for seven years. I was like 37, or something like that. But since my kids left and went on their own, they dropped me back down to like 50 or something. It's hard to get a home around here. Whatever is on sale, like a trailer or something, people will buy it. That's what we're doing right now — saving money so that we can get a trailer."

Jimmy and Shirley Begay, who are in their mid-60s, live in the freeze area of Tuba City near Castle Rock in a trailer they purchased about eight years ago. When a tornado touched down in 2007, high winds peeled away the siding and blew off the roof. They tried to get help from several tribal offices, they said, but were denied assistance.



Brian Leddy/Independent

Ula Hardy gathers wood to heat their bus as a storm approaches in Tuba City, Ariz., in November. Hardy lives in a bus with her husband after her home burned down several years ago. Hardy's home was on Bennett Freeze land so she has had trouble getting assistance to rebuild.

"Navajo Housing Service told them they don't put any funding into trailer repair," said Don Yellowman of Forgotten People, who interpreted for Jimmy.

He's been gathering any kind of scrap lumber and nails to repair the roof. He got some help from his children, who bought some plywood for the siding, and so, little by little, piece by piece, he's putting it back together."

Begay's brother, George, was tearing down a house in Red Lake. "Jimmy recycled the lumber and some of the drywall and that's what he's using to refurbish his trailer. Delegates Hope MacDonald-Lone Tree, Raymond Maxx, and the chapter helped them out with money to put up their power pole so they could have electricity," Begay told Yellowman.

"We bought the trailer from a Navajo man," Shirley recounted. "One day, Jim was taking a break and when we

were eating I noticed there was a big pile of whatever that was on the side — and the wind just kept blowing. I said, 'Did you put some lumbars over here?' He said no. I looked out and the whole trailer blew to one side — even the walls. Not one window broke though. We took pictures of it."

When Jim went around to survey the damage, she said, he noticed that the walls were not bolted to the floor. "I told him, 'Jim, let's go get the man that we owe money to for the trailer.' We went and picked him up. He said, 'Well, you know, you folks don't have to pay any more on this trailer.' He didn't know what to think."

"We just held each other for that moment. What could we say or do? It was evening by then. We started the next day going door to door trying to ask for help, and nobody would help."

But Jimmy didn't let that stop him. They stayed in a

small travel trailer while he tried to get supplies to rebuild the walls and roof. "During all that time there was no fuss, no arguing," Shirley said. "We were calm. He said, 'We're going to rebuild it.'"

The same trailer, they learned, was encroaching on their neighbor's property and the neighbor wanted it moved, Shirley said. "So Jim went and cut the trailer in half because we couldn't afford to have anybody move that trailer again. He cut it in half and sort of put it to the side so that it's in the shape of an L," she said, laughing. "It's sitting like that now. It was quite a job."

"To this day, we still need Sheetrock and insulation, we need to paint it, we need that tape you put on it and mud — we need to finish it. I'm just telling Jim, 'When are we going to relax?' We want to enjoy our home without having to do everything every day."

On the day the Independent spoke with the Begays, Jimmy — who has had back problems since 1997 — had been replacing the ceiling with pieces of Sheetrock they had been given. "He uses scraps to make the home that we live in. If you see the trailer, you will know he's a good builder. He built it back up. I just appreciate him so much," Shirley said.

"The Bennett Freeze that was lifted, when I first heard it, I sure thought that the Navajo Tribe would come rushing into the Bennett Freeze area and help the people. I was so disappointed. There are a lot of people that need help. I would like to see them get a better home, especially elderlies. They really need it. We've suffered long enough."

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