



# NAVAJO NATION DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### NAVAJO NATION FILES CRIMINAL CHARGES AGAINST ARCHITECTS OF MASSIVE MARIJUANA OPERATION

WINDOW ROCK, NAVAJO NATION – The Navajo Nation has filed criminal charges against two Navajos it says were illegally growing marijuana for distribution.

The Navajo Nation Office of the Prosecutor alleges that Dineh Benally and Farley Blue-Eyes operated a massive high-grade marijuana operation in and around Shiprock, N.M., in violation of Navajo law.

The Navajo Nation Code makes it a crime to possess, manufacture, transport, sell, use, trade, or deliver marijuana on Navajo lands pursuant to Section 394(a)(3) of Title 17 – Possession or Sale of Controlled Substances.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Navajo Nation successfully obtained a temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction against hemp and cannabis farming alleged to have been carried out by Benally and Blue-Eyes.

The TRO prohibited Benally and his “officers, agents, servants, employees and those persons in active concert or participation with them from growing or otherwise cultivating hemp on the Navajo Nation in Shiprock, N.M., and the surrounding areas.” The TRO enjoined them from acts that included, but were not limited to, “growing, producing, manufacturing or transporting hemp on the Navajo Nation.”

In November 2020, the FBI, in coordination with the Navajo Nation Police Department and multiple federal and state law enforcement partners, raided 21 farms housing and two residences containing more than 1,100 grow houses in the Shiprock area.

During the court authorized raid, law enforcement uncovered and destroyed more than a quarter million live plants and processed an estimated 60,000 pounds, or 30 tons, of evidence. The farms of Benally and Blue-Eyes are alleged to have been part of that raid.

“No one is above the law,” said Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren. “Anyone coming into our communities who seeks to harm the Nation or our Navajo people will be held accountable under my administration, no matter who they are.”

Navajo Nation Attorney General Ethel Branch said the Navajo Nation is committed to ensure the residents of Shiprock receive the justice they deserve.

“If found guilty through the criminal justice process,” she said, “Benally and others must be held accountable for using the COVID-19 pandemic to conceal what turned out to be a highly disruptive illegal marijuana operation, exploiting Navajo residents, and harming the Nation’s precious lands and natural resources.”

Chief Prosecutor Vernon L. Jackson, Sr., said he looks forward to the Special Prosecutors presenting the Nation’s evidence in Court.

“It’s important to the Nation’s sovereignty for my Office to pursue complex cases of this nature. We coordinated with our law enforcement partners in the joint law enforcement operation that eradicated the massive marijuana operation in and around Shiprock and we have investigated the actions of those believed to be involved ever since. We will pursue all ethical and lawful methods toward holding Mr. Benally and Mr. Blue-Eyes accountable for their actions.”

Benally and Blue Eyes have both been served their criminal complaints – six total – and they are currently awaiting arraignment in late January 2024. Additionally, more than a dozen of Benally’s former workers have sued him in New Mexico state court for allegedly engaging in human trafficking, intentional infliction of emotional distress, false imprisonment, RICO, and conspiracy.

The claims contained in the complaints filed against Mr. Benally and Mr. Blue-Eyes are only allegations – and not proof – of criminal conduct on their part. Mr. Benally and Mr. Blue-Eyes, like every single criminal defendant appearing in Navajo Nation Courts, are innocent until and unless proven guilty.

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