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In the Navajo tongue December is the month of "increasing cold and wind." When that "increasing cold and wind" is accompanied by eight days of snow, as it was last December, the Navajos are in trouble.

From December 12 to 20 it snowed, and the wind blew, on the Navajo and Hopi Reservations. Farther south, more than seven inches of rain fell on the Papago Reservation, which normally gets 11 inches in an entire year.

Many Navajos live in small adobe or rock "hogan" scattered over a reservation the size of West Virginia. Under the best of conditions many homes are isolated by most American standards. Add snow that drifted up to seven feet on the level and to 40 feet deep in some highway cuts, and a real emergency situation exists.

That this emergency did not turn into a major disaster was the result of a widespread and concerted effort by tribal officials, the Federal Government civilian and military -- State and local governments, and a host of private organizations and individuals.

This is the analysis of a special Storm Evaluation Committee appointed by Robert L. Bennett, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, to survey the storm-buffeted reservations to check on the efficiency of emergency rescue programs.

The five-man committee, which included two Navajos, visited the areas early in January while final mop-up operations were still in progress.

"The consensus was that the program initiated had been needed and had resulted in saving lives and livestock," the committee said.

"There were some criticisms that it took some time to get the program rolling and c90rdinated and that some areas did not receive the emergency aid which they wanted, but the results achieved indicated that in general the most serious emergencies were adequately dealt with."

As of January 12, the date of the Committee report, known Indian storm connected deaths totaled nine, all on the vast Navajo Reservation and all as a result of exposure and freezing. The U.S. Public Health Service's Division of Indian Health reported that at least 10 more Indians would have died of illness or exposure if they had not been airlifted to safety.

The Committee, in its report to Commissioner Bennett, said that leadership roles in the emergency were taken by the Navajo and Hopi Tribal Councils, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Division of Indian Health of the U.S. Public Health Service, in launching protective and life-saving programs.

The Committee noted that the "roll call of major participants in the emergency life-saving, food supplying, fuel providing and other actions is long. We would list as major participants the Air Force, the Army, the Navy, the Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Surplus Food Commodities, the Forest

Service, the Soil Conservation Service, the Air National Guard, the Navajo and Hopi Tribal organizations, the Geological Survey, the National Park Service, the Farmers Home Administration, the Office of Emergency Planning, the General Services Administration, and various State and county agencies in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico."

Rescue equipment ranged from military helicopter and Air National Guard C-119 Flying boxcars through trucks, jeeps, and horses, to mechanical snow vehicles donated and supervised by their Wisconsin manufacturer.

More than 400,000 pounds of food were delivered by, air of a total of 900,000 pounds supplied the reservations. Several hundred tons of hay were airdropped to livestock. There were 2,578 helicopter sorties. The total rescue operation involved 2,000 people, including Air Force reservists from as far away as Oregon and Virginia.

The supply operations even managed to provide turkey with all the trimmings, a half-pound of candy and nuts, and a gift for each of the several thousand Indian children stranded in boarding schools over Christmas. Some of these children found time to stamp out a "Merry Christmas" message in the snow for passing airplane crews.

The Evaluation Committee noted that the full effects of the storm could not be assessed, and that further snows or rains could compound the problems created by the original emergency. On the Papago Reservation the heavy rains so eroded the walls of many adobe houses that their roofs caved in and the structures were completely destroyed.

The Committee met in Phoenix, Tucson, Window Rock, and Chinle, Ariz., with Navajo, Hopi, and Papago tribal officials and representatives; Bureau of Indian Affairs Area and Agency officials; a member of the staff of Governor Jack Williams of Arizona; traders and many others involved in the rescue operations.

Serving on the Committee: W. Joynes Macfarlan, Chief, Office of Public Information, Bureau of Indian Affairs, who was chairman; Thomas H. Dodge of Phoenix, former Navajo Tribal Council Chairman and retired BIA Agency Superintendent; Newton Edwards, staff assistant to the Assistant Secretary for Public Land Management, Department of the Interior; Arthur J. Hubbard, Sr., of Phoenix, a Navajo and Arizona State Indian Program Officer for the Commerce Department's Economic Development Administration; and Ken Nishimoto, Chief, Management Appraisal Services, Division of Indian Health, USPHS.

The results of storm-related activities were expressed in these words to the Committee by Navajo Tribal Council Chairman Raymond Nakai:

"My position today is that we have done an outstanding job between the Tribe "and the Bureau here. We had a time getting some things going, and some technical difficulties. We were fortunate in making the moves as we did. We averted a major disaster. We did an outstanding job with the resources that we had on hand to do it with."