About New Mexico

Indigenous History, Present, and Future

New Mexico is the homeland of 23 Indigenous communities and tribes - 19 Pueblos, three Apache tribes (the Fort Sill Apache Tribe, the Jicarilla Apache Nation and the Mescalero Apache Tribe), and the Navajo Nation. Each Tribe is a sovereign nation with its own government, life-ways, traditions, and culture. We will convene in the ancestral homelands of the Southern Tiwa People, in particular the Pueblos of Sandia and Isleta. As caretakers of the Middle Rio Grande, the Tiwa speaking Nations have nurtured its desert, mountain, and riverine ecosystems, and continue to foster the cultural and economic life of the area.

Asserting the right to clean water

In 1987, Congress amended the Clean Water Act, granting 129 tribes around the country equal standing with states on water-quality issues. Suddenly, Native Americans had the right to dictate upstream water quality in rivers that flow through tribal lands. The Isleta Pueblo sits six miles downstream from where Albuquerque was dumping 55 million gallons of wastewater each day. Sewage from the city's 450,000 residents made the river water unhealthy for farming and religious ceremonies. To address this issue, Isleta was the first tribe to establish a water-quality standards program allowed under the act. Despite the City of Albuquerque's resistance to pay for the cleaning of the water and putting up a fight to the extent of claiming that the Pueblo of Isleta had no scientific basis, the Supreme Court upheld Isleta's right to dictate Albuquerque's water quality. In New Mexico, seven other tribes, many of which sit along major rivers, have developed water quality standard programs. To learn more, check out this article.

The 19 Pueblos of New Mexico

Text from Indian Pueblo Cultural Center

There are 19 Pueblo tribes in New Mexico. Each pueblo is a sovereign nation and federally recognized. Today, Pueblo peoples are located primarily in New Mexico. At one time, the Pueblo homelands reached into what is now Colorado and Arizona, where incredible dwellings and trading centers were established at sites such as Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico and Mesa Verde in southwestern Colorado. Pueblo peoples have preserved their identities in the face of multiple colonizing nations, and today, as always, value their identities and traditional ways of life. Pueblo beliefs and actions are still guided by Pueblo Core Values, which include love, respect, compassion, faith, understanding, spirituality, balance, peace, and empathy. Celebrations and ceremonies are continued throughout the year, maintaining the connection to Pueblo communities, ancestors, and to the Earth. The 19 Pueblos of New Mexico include :

- Acoma
- Cochiti
- Isleta
- Jemez
- Laguna
- Nambé
- Ohkay Owingeh
- Picuris
- Pojoaque
- Sandia
- San Felipe
- San Ildefonso
- Santa Ana
- Santa Clara
- Santo Domingo
- Taos
- Tesuque
- Zia
- Zuni

State of Water, Climate, and Justice in New Mexico

New Mexico is rich with natural resources; however, industries such as energy (coal, uranium, oil, and gas); industrial scale agriculture; and military activities (nuclear) have positioned New Mexico's natural ecosystem and communities as a sacrifice zone for generations. The legacy of uranium mining continues today on the community health and waters of New Mexico such as contamination of land and water sources, respiratory and other health problems, and economic hardship for those who worked in the mines. Much of the uranium mines were located on or near tribal lands such as the Navajo Nation, exacerbating health risks to already overburdened communities. Nearly 40 years after the end of uranium mining throughout the region, there are still more than 500 federally recognized abandoned uranium mines left in the Navajo Nation alone, and more than 10,000 in the western United States, left for remediation and pending clean-up[1]. Although uranium mining is no longer an active industry, New Mexico remains at the forefront of polluting energy industries. New Mexico is now the nation's second leading oil and gas producing state (13.3%), after Texas (42.5%).

Drought, as well as water mismanagement, continues to impact the state's water sources:the Rio Grande ran dry for the first time in 40 years in 2022, exposing a jarring new reality for the state. Despite the rising alarms on the growing threats of water scarcity, New Mexico is experiencing rapid oil and gas expansion, further intensifying environmental injustice. In fact, natural gas production has nearly doubled and oil production has grown by 127%[2] since 2019. Moreso, fracking produces four times more toxic waste than actual oil and gas.Industries in New Mexico are running out of room to dispose of such waste, also coined as produced water, and their solutions to this problem will exacerbate environmental justice issues[3]. Produced water contains numerous hazardous compounds and evidence suggests that the quality of groundwater and surface water may be compromised by disposal of produced water. To learn more about produced water, check out this presentation by YUCCA and No False Solutions.

The expansion of exploitative industries has led to growing pollution and adverse health impacts throughout New Mexico[4]:

- 144,000 New Mexicans live within 1 mile of an oil or gas well.
- Higher risks of premature births and deaths, cancers, and heart issues.
- Air pollution and water contamination disproportionately impacts Indigenous and Latine communities in New Mexico.

New Mexicans are already experiencing the climate emergency. Depleting water resources, expanding fossil fuel production, leasing of public lands, and pushing *false solutions*[5] such as fossil fuel hydrogen and carbon offsets are driving poor community health outcomes .

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[1] "US Uranium Mining Legacy Still Harms the Navajo Nation." The Equation. May 16, 2025. https://blog.ucs.org/chanese-forte/us-uranium-mining-legacy-still-harms-the-navajo-nation/.
[2] " Bleeding New Mexico Dry, 2024" https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dvjw2oizyoP_fmc6g2alvtW6TPaJ__gG/view
[3] https://www.defendnmwater.org/about
[4] https://www.nmclimatejustice.org/polluters

[5] "A false solution in energy refers to a proposed solution to climate change or energy challenges that, while seemingly beneficial, actually perpetuates problems, hinders real progress, or even exacerbates the issues it claims to address." (More here)

Yet, New Mexico also has a strong, intergenerational movement infrastructure fighting to protect the sacredness and health of the state's natural ecosystem and communities, and working together to advance a just transition. Defend New Mexico is one such coalition working to loosen the grip of the fossil fuel industry and keep water clean. Defend NM Water is a grassroots campaign to defend New Mexico's water from oil and gas waste contamination. No False Solutions is another coalition in the constellation of movers and shakers in New Mexico. No False Solutions is made up of frontline, youth, and grassroots organizations that have been working together to denounce false solutions that appear in New Mexico climate legislation.

More movers and shakers in New Mexico to learn about:

- Indigenous Lifeways
- Los Jardines Institute
- New Energy Economy
- New Mexico Climate Justice
- New Mexico Social Justice and Equity Institute
- Pueblo Action Alliance
- Tewa Women United
- YUCCA

Zuni Pueblo Community Visit

The Zuni people have lived in the American Southwest for thousands of years. Their cultural and religious traditions are rooted, in large part, in the people's deep and close ties to the mountains, river ways, forests, and deserts of this ancient Zuni homeland. Zuni is a sovereign, self-governed nation with their own constitutional government, courts, police force, school system, and economic base

Primarily farmers, the Zuni people raise maize and wheat and engage in jewelry making. Traditional Zuni life is oriented around a matrilineal clan system and a complex ceremonial system based on a belief in the ancestors (ancient ones).

For the Zuni people, water is not just a resource but an integral part of their culture, spirituality, and way of life. Efforts to address water challenges in Zuni Pueblo should be framed as part of a broader movement for Indigenous justice, self-determination, and environmental stewardship.

Community Visit Themes Connected to WECR Work

- **Inadequate water infrastructure:** Several challenges with water infrastructure in Zuni Pueblo reflect broader systemic issues of neglect and underinvestment in Indigenous communities. Historically, Indigenous peoples have been denied control over essential resources like water, and much of the infrastructure in Zuni Pueblo remains outdated as a result of centuries of colonial policies and practices that restricted access to resources and self-governance. Today, the Zuni Pueblo and other communities in the area often lack access to regulated drinking water, increasing the risk of exposure to contaminated sources. An ongoing lack of sufficient funding and technical assistance for infrastructure development makes it difficult to implement necessary upgrades to meet the growing demand for water. This situation not only undermines the Pueblo's sovereignty but also prevents the community from having full authority over their own water systems, which are crucial for sustaining life, culture, and traditions. Zuni Pueblo

leaders are advocating for federal and state recognition of their sovereignty in managing water systems, as well as a commitment to sustainable practices that respect the traditional knowledge and values of the community. The fight for water infrastructure improvements is not simply about meeting basic needs; it is about asserting the Pueblo's rights to govern their own resources, protect their cultural heritage, and ensure the health and sustainability of future generations.

- **Indigenous Sovereignty:** Indigenous knowledge systems and water management practices, which have been passed down through generations, continue to be overlooked and undervalued in the face of modern water management solutions. However modern water management solutions, alone, cannot address the climate crisis in this area. Indigenous sovereignty is also necessary, and includes the right to utilize traditional ecological knowledge in the management of water resources, ensuring that future generations have access to water in ways that respect both the land and their cultural practices. The impacts of climate change are a call to honor and integrate this traditional knowledge into water policies and systems.Indigenous sovereignty includes the right to protect and preserve cultural practices that depend on natural resources, and this right must be recognized and respected in efforts to address water challenges.

Navajo Water Project, DigDeep

DigDeep, a WECR ally member, is a national human rights nonprofit serving the more than two million people in the US living in the **water access gap** who lack basic access to running water and sanitation. At the heart of their work are locally-led efforts to expand these services to families across Navajo Nation, Appalachia, and Texas Colonias. Dig Deep organizes research, storytelling, and advocacy strategies that support and broaden the impact of their project work to achieve their mission of ensuring that every person in the country has access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WaSH).

While the everyday reality of living without these basic services looks different across the country, the impacts on public health, safety, and economic opportunity can look very similar. In 2019, Dig Deep partnered with the U.S. Water Alliance to publish the report, *Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States: A National Action Plan*, which was the first-ever landscape study of WaSH issues in the U.S. Their research found that communities of color are significantly more likely to be impacted, with **Indigenous households being 19 times more likely** than white households to lack basic WaSH access and Black and Latino households being twice as likely. Building on these findings, the Dig Deep team published *Draining: The Economic Impact of America's Hidden Water Crisis* quantifying the economic impacts of water insecurity in our nation. This examination found that the water access gap conservatively costs our economy nearly $8.6 billion every year it remains open.

The Navajo Water Project (NWP) is Dig Deep's oldest and largest water project with active efforts in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. The NWP team works directly with households to understand their situation and works to find the solution they need including Home Water System installations, bathroom additions, and supports families in obtaining necessary documentation to execute construction work on their land. Raising awareness and finding solutions is critically important for the Navajo Nation where 30% of homes do not have access to running water and sanitation. The NWP, like all of their water projects, are locally-led and locally-hired to build lasting relationships in the communities they serve.

Themes Connected to WECR Work

- **Lack of water/sanitation infrastructure.** In the early 1900s the federal government often encouraged settlements in the West and subsidized water resource development that benefited non-Tribal communities. For the Navajo Nation, and many other communities across the country that were unable to develop water infrastructure, this has made it extremely difficult to catch up. This gap was exacerbated by a general decline in federal water infrastructure funding. To this day, tribal water rights are repeatedly violated despite the 1908 Supreme Court Case Winters vs. United States. Currently, it's estimated that 30% percent of people on Navajo Nation lack access to running water or sanitation. Many families must drive long distances to haul water for drinking, cooking, bathing, and other necessities. Having a land area larger than ten different U.S. states, large swaths of low-density, mountainous areas make it highly expensive to extend water lines from centralized systems. This has led to a reliance on unregulated sources which can be dangerously contaminated by uranium mines.
- **Moving away from communities left behind to community building and Indigenous solutions.** The Navajo Water Project is helping build long-term, sustainable systems and solutions for families to stay and thrive in their ancestral homes so they can retain their deep cultural connections. We hope this engagement will demonstrate the challenges to accessing WASH services but ultimately highlight the importance of growing opportunities within the Navajo Nation. For example, DigDeep has partnered with IAPMO and Navajo Technical University to create a plumbing certification program to meet the needs of the nation while creating new opportunities.
- **Climate change is among the most urgent, wide-ranging crises we face, posing significant challenges to water systems and is already severely impacting drinking water and sanitation access.** Droughts are threatening limited water supply on the Navajo Nation, where 30% of households don't have running water or indoor plumbing. Folks living on the reservation have to haul water from distant sources. Climate change impacts will have disproportionate impacts on different groups: race, income, and age will increase vulnerability to floods, extreme temperature, and poor air quality.
    - **Over 2 million people** nationwide lack access to water & sanitation.
    - **Native Americans are 19x more likely to lack water and sanitation** than white Americans
    - And Black and Latino households are 2x as likely to live in the water access gap than white americans

To learn more, visit:

- DigDeep
- Navajo Water Project
- Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States: A National Action Plan
- Draining: The Economic Impact of America's Hidden Water Crisis

Expressions of Gratitude

The PolicyLink Water team, which organized the WECR Convening, would like to extend a huge thank you to this year's local co-host, New Mexico Social Justice Institute for Equity & Justice. We are so grateful for their enthusiasm and partnership in putting together a meaningful and engaging Convening. Thank you to Anna Rondon for her strategic vision and tireless organizing efforts and her team!

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Thank you to our local community hosts, in particular Sherry Bellson and Zuni Pueblo, Los Jardines Institute, and Dig Deep for opening your hearts, and sharing your stories and expertise. We stand with you in solidarity and will continue fighting for justice across our communities.

We also extend a heartfelt thanks to the 2025 WECR Advisory Group. Their leadership, vision, and recommendations have resulted in this amazing time we have together. We are also grateful for all their efforts to live our Caucus values, reducing environmental waste where possible and supporting local, BIPOC and minority-owned businesses.

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Finally, we send much love and gratitude out to the
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While many of you have moved on in new spaces and roles, we know that the gift of being together each year is largely because of the tremendous friendships and movement you instilled in this community and built over the years.