

New Mexico Environmental Law Centers gets new executive director

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
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Plans to incorporate diversity, equity, inclusion

The New Mexico Environmental Law Center has a new executive director. Dr. Virginia Necochea, who started Aug. 1, will be maintaining relationships with staff, community, the center board, funders, and donors, among other things.

Necochea, who hails from southeast Los Angeles, and has Mexican indigenous ancestry, moved to New Mexico in 1998 for a master's degree and Ph.D. in Educational Thought and Sociocultural Studies at the University of New Mexico. There she found herself drawn to engage in water protection and acequias in her new community.

Acequias are irrigation canals that serve the Southwest and were traditionally used in Spain and the former Spanish colonies in the Americas.

As she became more attached to her new home, Necochea laid down roots and developed a

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very close connection to the Tsayatoh Chapter, where she attends Diné ceremonies.

That relationship led her to a commitment to environmental justice.

Environmental injustice, sometimes referred to as environmental racism, is demonstrated when toxic materials, chemicals environmental hazards and waste are dumped or stored in poor and marginalized communities.

“Environmental injustices play a key role in why Diné communities have been the hardest hit [by COVID-19],” she told the *Gallup Sun* Aug 18. “The injustices that communities in that area have been facing for decades ... to me it is no coincidence why the Navajo Nation is the hardest hit.

“That weighs in my heart and mind. It’s wrong. It’s an injustice.”

Her commitment to ensuring protection of urban and semi-urban acequias and getting the community reconnected to the acequia environment led her to create CESOSS, Center for Social Sustainable Systems.

Necochea was a founding board member of CESOSS, which was designed to become a hub for the community in the South Valley of Albuquerque and the larger Middle Rio Grande Region. It works to protect historical acequias, water, and land.

Now, through NMELC, she is taking her mission and work to protect Mother Earth and indigenous traditions and cultures, to the most historically marginalized communities across the state.

NMELC serves what Necochea calls “front line communities.”

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She describes them as “low income, communities of color — the communities most [markedly] impacted by environmental injustices and environmental racism, because they are exposed to air pollutants, and toxins in the land and in the water.”

Necochea said that one of the ways she wants to impact NMELC is by incorporating “DEI” into the center’s work.

When asked what DEI means, she said, “DEI stands for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.”

She went on to explain it is a movement of core values embraced by the National Council of Nonprofits.

Necochea said she will work to be sure equity issues are at the forefront of the NMELC’s work.

Could this mean the center will take on different cases as a result of incorporating DEI?

Necochea said that is a possibility.

She emphasized that she wants the communities served by NMELC to have a seat at the table.

“They’re the ones that should be part of the decision-making processes of our organizations,” she said. She wants to make sure “that their voices are being heard and they set the direction of the words of the NMELC.”

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