Written by By Wilfred Herrera, Jr. High Country News
Friday, 15 January 2021 04:35





Laguna Pueblo Gov. Wilfred Herrera, Jr., urges the state to strengthen its proposed air quality rules

The well-being of the natural world is central to the identity of the people of the Pueblo of Laguna and tribal people throughout New Mexico. Our ancestors came to Laguna generations ago when drought forced them to migrate from the Four Corners area. As we struggle with severe drought again today, connected to human-caused climate change, nothing is more important than protecting our climate, our air, our water, and our people.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, D, has our complete support for her efforts to make New Mexico a national leader in combating oil and gas pollution. Now, we call on her environment and natural resources agencies — the New Mexico Environment Department and Energy Minerals and Natural Resources Department — to help her step up to the challenge by enacting the most protective methane rules in the nation.

Methane is a potent greenhouse gas that, in the short term, is more than 80 times more harmful than carbon dioxide, because it absorbs more energy.

In New Mexico, oil and gas operations release more than 1 million metric tons of methane every year. With the Trump administration's rollback of federal methane and other air pollution rules, it's clear we need to act for the protection of our people.

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New Mexico needs effective air pollution and methane regulations that require oil and gas companies to cut methane emissions and leaks. This will stop energy waste and protect our air and climate for future generations.

Instead, as they stand now, New Mexico's proposed methane regulation rule and air quality rules would be the weakest in the nation, with loopholes exempting 95% of the wells in New Mexico from regulation. This is unacceptable.

Fortunately, there are still a few months to close these loopholes in upcoming draft proposals, and communities across the state are speaking up to ensure that the final rules fulfill Gov. Lujan Grisham's goal of establishing meaningful rules for regulating methane production and air quality regulations.

In New Mexico's largest oil and gas counties, air quality continues to deteriorate. Pollution from oil and gas operations in the Northwest has risen significantly, and we're experiencing longer, hotter summers, which lead to wildfires, and further exacerbate air-quality problems. Unless state methane rules and other air-pollution rules are strengthened, we can expect to see more respiratory disease like asthma and emphysema in the near term, and even more dire long-term impacts from climate change.

The problem is even more acute for our neighbors in San Juan County, home to many Navajo communities. More than half the Native Americans in that county — about 24,600 people — live within a mile of a well site. In 2014, NASA discovered a methane cloud the size of Delaware over the Four Corners region, the highest concentration of atmospheric methane in the United States.

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According to a NASA press release, this cloud came from methane leaks in natural gas production and processing equipment in New Mexico's San Juan Basin, the most active coalbed methane production area in the country. Strong, comprehensive air pollution and methane rules are critical and overdue.

Since the days of uranium mining spills and contamination, communities and Indigenous villages like Laguna have borne the brunt of industrial pollution. New Mexico's environment and natural resources agencies now have an opportunity to chart a better course for our state by finalizing rules that close loopholes and ensure that the historic problems of environmental injustice are addressed.

The draft rules are simply inadequate. They have serious flaws with exemptions that would do little to combat climate change and will leave too many New Mexicans — especially Native people, children, and those living in poor, rural communities — vulnerable to air pollution, toxic chemicals and serious health problems. As the state considers rules to cut methane and air pollution by the oil and gas industry, it must ensure that all wells are regulated and that all New Mexicans benefit from the protections these new rules offer. If that doesn't happen, we will fail our ancestors. It is they who fought their whole lives to ensure a sustainable future.

But more importantly, we will fail our children, for it is they who will carry on our culture and our people.

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