



Thursday night [Nov. 19], a group of Indigenous community leaders gave presentations about the legacy of uranium mining in the state that still threatens the health and environment of their communities, decades after the last mines ceased operations.

From the 1940s through the early 1990s, New Mexico produced roughly 70 percent of the uranium in the United States, which was used in nuclear weaponry during the Cold War. Members of Indigenous communities across the state did most of the dangerous mining of the radioactive material, and those communities are still struggling to hold the federal government accountable for cleaning up the toxic contamination that was left behind.

“We felt that there were a large portion of our communities across the state that still remain largely unaware of the major environmental justice impacts that uranium continues to have on so many individuals—especially our Indigenous communities—across the state,” Virginia Necochea, executive director of the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, which organized the online event, said.

“It’s very important that we recognize that there are hundreds upon hundreds of abandoned mines, unsealed pits, mine entrances, tailing ponds, waste piles, highly radioactive materials and toxic chemicals from uranium mining and milling, many that have yet to be cleaned up and continue to pose significant health threats,” Necochea said.

“This continued uranium contamination that we witness, and that our communities continue to face, is a clear example of environmental racism and an environmental injustice that continues.”

A STATE OF SACRIFICE ZONES

Much of the uranium mining that occurred in New Mexico was on tribal lands and was performed by tribal members. The Grants Mining District and the nearby Navajo Nation is home to one of the country's most productive uranium belts, and the region was one of the most intensely-mined areas in the U.S., according to Manuel Pino, a member of Acoma Pueblo and an organizer of the Laguna-Acoma Coalition for a Safe Environment. Today, there are more than 1,000 remaining uranium mines on the Navajo Nation that have not been reclaimed or remediated.

A number of remaining mines and mill sites remain in the Grants Mining District and in the San Mateo Creek Basin that have not been fully remediated yet and continue to impact groundwater resources that the surrounding communities rely on for drinking water.

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NM Political Report