

Industry's impact on the land and peoples of the four corners

Written by By Ray Begaye The Torun Group
Friday, 29 December 2017 06:00



As an indigenous individual residing on federally subsidized land, I often walk or drive the vast distance that crisscrosses the Four Corners region of Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico.

This dynamic piece of the American West has been my home in one way or another for many years. In the spring of 1970, a college friend and I hiked the colossal mesa ridge from southern Colorado to the upper ends of New Mexico. The intricate landscape had an abundance of natural vegetation, aquifer water seeping between rocks, a menagerie of animal tracks and birds' nests, and a pristine horizon in all directions.

We were, however, not the people first to travel there as we crossed several well-worn dirt roads during our trek. These vestiges of previous visitors were probably made to facilitate access for various corporations exploring for oil, coal, and gas. Upon summiting a particularly high section of the mesa, Hogback Ridge, I looked down into the lower valley where the San Juan River flows.

The dirt roads we had come across earlier had reappeared below me and now lead to numerous pump stations scattered across the valley floor. At the time, these "road scars" deeply offended my friend, who had grown up in California. As for me, I didn't wholly comprehend what these roads and stations meant for the future of the Four Corners. It was not until years later that I truly understood my friend's indignation in the desert that day.

In the years following, the corporations came and influenced the powers-that-be to allow their various industries to mine, drill, and dig. By commissioning cheap indigenous labor, they extracted the ores, oil, and gas they sought and, having made their riches, moved on leaving destruction and contamination behind.

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There are multiple examples of this devastation:

In Shiprock, N.M., late one night in August of 1960, roughly 600,000 gallons of contaminated material spilled into the San Juan River when the storage pond containment walls broke at the Shiprock uranium mill. The spill barely made local news. The San Juan River was the source of water for the people and livestock in the area. Many of these people suffered negative effects later on. There were no medical and/or environmental studies done, but in the following years, people died from cancer and other diseases throughout the valley all the way to Mexican Hat, UT.

I was only a child when this devastation happened but I remember fish dying along the banks and frogs jumping out of the water that day. This spill was the worst spill prior to the one at Churchrock, New Mexico.

On July 16, 1979, the United Nuclear Corporation disposal pond breached its dam at Churchrock upstream from Gallup, N.M. Over 1,000 tons of solid radioactive mill waste and 93 million gallons of acidic radioactive tailing solutions flowed into Rio Puerco and the contaminates traveled 80 miles downstream. In both of these major spills, local residents, who were mostly Navajo, used the rivers for irrigation and livestock and were not aware of the dangerous effects of the contamination. United Nuclear washed their hands of the deaths of these indigenous people.

On August 5, 2015, 3 million gallons of heavy orange and yellow metal sludge spilled from an abandoned mine near Silverton, Colorado into the Animas and San Juan River thereby devastating the economy and forever affecting the lives of the locals. The United States Environmental Protection Agency was uncovering the mine when their machinery accidentally dug into a hill that blocked the contaminants. The U.S. Supreme Court sided with the federal government to do nothing by way of maintenance or compensation.

On July 14, 2016, a massive fire at a fracking site in rural New Mexico scorched 36 oil storage tanks and prompted the evacuation of 55 Navajo residents. The fire still burned some three days after the first explosion was reported.

WPX Energy, the Oklahoma-based company, has about 159,000 net acres under lease in the

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San Juan Basin, according to the Unconventional Oil and Gas Center. The company operates some 880 natural gas wells and holds a joint ownership interest in another 2,400 wells. Government documents show that WPX has, in the past, received violation notices for drilling wells before receiving all the needed approvals. Moreover, the nonprofit organization, Environment New Mexico, reported that prior to leaving Pennsylvania, WPX was one of the top 10 violators of health and environmental codes in the state, with 86 violations from 2011 through 2014. Cabot Oil & Gas Corporation was number one with 265 environmental and health violations.

Currently, there are pumping stations positioned along US Highway 550 and these companies are still extracting oil and gas from the earth. The noxious odor from the plumes is most prominent Nageezi and Counselor, New Mexico, the fumes will follow you for the duration of the trip.

A 2011 article in the journal, Human and Ecological Risk Assessment, examined the potential health impacts of oil and gas drilling in relation to the chemicals used during drilling, fracking, processing, and delivery of natural gas. The paper compiled a list of 632 chemicals (an incomplete list due to trade secrecy exemptions) identified from drilling operations throughout the U.S. Their research found that 75% of the chemicals could affect the skin, eyes, and other sensory organs, and the respiratory and gastrointestinal systems. Approximately 40–50% could affect the brain/nervous system, immune and cardiovascular systems, and the kidneys; 37% could affect the endocrine system; and 25% could cause cancer and mutations.

Fracking is the surest way to extract gas from deep beneath the earth. According to Wikipedia, fracking is defined or explained as, “hydraulic fracturing (also fracking, fraccing, frac’ing, hydrofacturing or hydrofracking) is a well stimulation technique in which rock is fractured by a pressurized liquid. The process involves the high-pressure injection of ‘fracking fluid’ (primarily water, containing sand or other proppants suspended with the aid of thickening agents) into a well bore to create cracks in the deep-rock formations through which natural gas, petroleum, and brine will flow more freely.”

The question often asked is, “What goes into the water before it is injected into the ground?” The stories vary, but the end result is the destabilization of subterranean earth. It has been documented that the fallout due to this man-made destabilization comes in the form of increased seismic activity, and aquifer contamination.

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On October 27, 2017, Sandoval County attempted to plan for an oil & gas development. Many local residents opposed this proposal. SandRidge Energy, an Oklahoma based company, proposed to drill an exploratory well on the west side of Rio Rancho. Subsequently, they withdrew their application and filed for bankruptcy.

Sandoval County and its powers-that-be are now being pressured with baseless promises of economic gain and community enhancement by more of these wealthy, out-of-state, and (sometimes foreign) corporations so that they may continue this abhorrent practice of exploitation and evisceration of the land and people of the Four Corners.

While New Mexico's legacy is one of abundance in natural resources, this legacy has come at a price to its people. This energy-rich basin in the American West continues to offer unlimited profits for predatory conglomerates and faceless multi-national corporations, and yet its residents have yet to see their homes and communities receive any sustained improvement from any of these ventures.

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