

Speakers tout NM's climate leadership, but are quiet on oil, gas production

Written by By Kendra Chamberlain NM Political Report
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A group of local leaders touted New Mexico's work towards addressing climate change during a recent webinar on public health and climate change. But speakers such as Speaker of the House Brian Egolf, a Santa Fe Democrat, and New Mexico Department of Health (DOH) Sec. Kathyleen Kunkel tip-toed around the state's recent record oil production and its contribution to climate change.

Fossil fuel combustion is the chief driver of carbon dioxide emissions that are causing climate change. While many states have begun transitioning to renewable energy sources to replace coal, oil and natural gas, New Mexico is the only state to adopt a 100 percent clean energy mandate while also producing record levels of oil.

"For the [Gov. Michelle] Lujan Grisham administration, environmental issues are public health priorities," Kunkel said in her remarks, adding that DOH is part of the governor's climate change task force. "Climate change creates new risks and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities in all communities across New Mexico; and presents growing challenges for human health and safety, quality of life and economic growth."

Kunkel said state agencies are currently evaluating how climate change may impact programs and are "integrating mitigation practices into those programs and operations."

"The state is committed to a coordinated, inter-agency strategy to support the 2015 Paris Agreement goals, and to achieve a state-wide reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of at least 45 percent by 2030," she said.

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The U.S. is poised to outpace every other country in the world in new oil and gas development, and current planned expansion into new oil and gas reserves will unlock up to 120 billion metric tons of new carbon pollution, according to a report released late last year.

The Permian Basin is at the center of that development. Shale fracking in New Mexico and Texas is projected to account for nearly 40 percent of that new development by 2050.

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State lawmakers are currently working on a comprehensive climate plan that will “set emission limits in other sectors of our economy, reduce CO emissions and other greenhouse gases,” according to Egolf.

“We in the state House of Representatives have made addressing climate one of our top priorities over the last two sessions, and we will continue to make New Mexico a climate leader nationally and globally,” he said.

He also touted the state’s solar and wind energy resources, pointing to the State Land Office, which recently announced a 118 percent increase in revenue from wind energy projects.

Egolf said that development is “a very important step in diversifying our state’s revenue sources to begin to once and for all end our state’s reliance on so much of our revenue coming from a single industry,” in an apparent reference to oil and gas production.

Air quality concerns and public health

Gov. Lujan Grisham’s climate priorities have centered on air quality concerns, rather than oil

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and gas production itself. The state is grappling with worsening air quality and increased pollution as a result of increased oil and gas production. Lujan Grisham has targeted reducing methane emissions and pollution from volatile organic compounds and nitrous oxides with new regulatory rules currently in development.

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Barbara Webber, executive director of Health Action New Mexico, which organized the event, spoke about the worsening air quality in the state and its impacts to New Mexican communities.

"There's no doubt oil and gas contribute to part of what's leading us down the path to climate change," Webber said, pointing to methane leaks and flaring in the state's energy producing areas.

Adella Begay, a retired health professional and board president of Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment (Diné CARE), stressed the disproportionate impacts of oil and gas pollution in the state on indigenous populations, children and poor rural communities.

"More than half of all Native Americans in San Juan County live within a mile of an oil well site," she said. She cited health impacts of long-term and short-term exposure to emissions and pollution, and other impacts from the oil and gas industry, including increased truck traffic, increased noise pollution and loss of grazing areas.

Begay said the climate crisis poses unique challenges to the Navajo people.

"More climate change means less water and more heat waves. Increased temperatures have significantly altered the water cycle in New Mexico," she said. Those developments are especially dangerous to the Navajo people, she said, where 30 percent of residents do not have municipal water supplies, and 40 percent of residents do not have electricity and cannot cool their homes in the summer.

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“Climate change is a public health emergency,” Begay said. “A strong methane rule is critical for climate and environmental justice for the Navajo Nation and for all New Mexicans.”

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