

# Valerie Rangel

I'm Valerie Rangel. Author of the 2019 book, Environmental Justice in New Mexico: Counting Coup.

As we approach the new year (2024) we cannot forget about the environmental and public health inequalities....systemic issues of inequality that existed long before this pandemic. Issues that we must all work to change.

The greatest public health crisis that was exacerbated during the pandemic was the lack of water infrastructure in rural communities. Former Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez reported that 40% of residents living within the Navajo reservation do not have running water or sanitation, many also lack electricity. These areas are in a region where uranium mining occurred where waste tailings and mining sites have not been cleaned up and the contamination has impacted the health of the communities as well as other organisms. McKinley and San Juan counties recorded the highest number of COVID cases and deaths in the state.

And at the same time, there are many rural towns in these counties that lack running water. They're also within a food desert, with few health care facilities.

These crises also overlap with environmental contamination.

McKinley and San Juan counties are also dealing with a 60-year legacy of uranium contamination in western New Mexico which has made many wells toxic.

Environmental injustice is the disproportionate effect of pollution and contamination on minority and low-income communities.

For decades, the Navajo Nation and its people have suffered disproportionately.

Many Navajo uranium workers and their families have become ill, and many have died, from diseases associated both with the uranium work itself and with living near uranium mines, mills, and waste dumps.

A recent University of New Mexico study found that more than one quarter of over 700 Navajo Nation women tested had high concentrations of uranium in their bodies.

Others, like the Ute Mountain Ute community of White Mesa in southeastern Utah, and the Havasupai Tribe in the Grand Canyon, also face threats posed by present day uranium operations.

Thank you, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham for your efforts to protect the people of New Mexico from becoming a national sacrifice zone for nuclear waste, and Secretary of Environment James Kenney

for your efforts to hold the Department of Energy (DOE) accountable to the people of New Mexico, ensuring the promises made when we agreed to host the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) are preserved.

The WIPP site is situated in an area where the earth's tectonic plates are rifting apart, in the past three years seismic activity has increased and earthquakes within the area have increased in magnitude and frequency due to magma rising. Within the Permian Basin there has been land subsidence and sink holes have formed due to the pumping of groundwater for the state's agricultural needs, as well as fracking from the oil and gas industry. The WIPP site lies within a karst landscape which formed as a result of water falling on the surface and entering the subsurface through cracks, fractures, and holes that have been dissolved into the bedrock. Evaporites are sedimentary rocks which are highly erodible, can fracture and shift and dissolve.

I'd like to encourage state and tribal leaders to create a plan to protect surface and groundwater resources, increase monitoring and testing for water quality, address the legacy of uranium contamination instead of accepting the most hazardous waste from toxic industries and allowing for

the continuation of uranium mining (in-situ leach mining) which will contaminate groundwater indefinitely.