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Impact of oil and gas drilling on Indigenous peoples in the Greater Chaco region of New Mexico

Grace Cohen
William & Mary

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Impact of Oil & Gas Drilling on Indigenous Peoples in the Greater Chaco region of New Mexico

BACKGROUND OF THE GREATER CHACO REGION:

Indigenous communities have existed in The Greater Chaco Region of northwestern New Mexico for thousands of years. Various groups in the region include: the Navajo (Diné) Nation and Pueblo Nations. Their culture, traditions, and years of familial history is rooted within these lands. This 8,000 square mile area also consists of the Chaco Canyon National Historical park, an UNESCO World Heritage Site which are meant to protect Indigenous cultures in the region.

Unfortunately, oil & gas drilling:

- 1) Disproportionately affects indigenous peoples
- 2) Puts their health at risk
- 3) Is not efficiently regulated

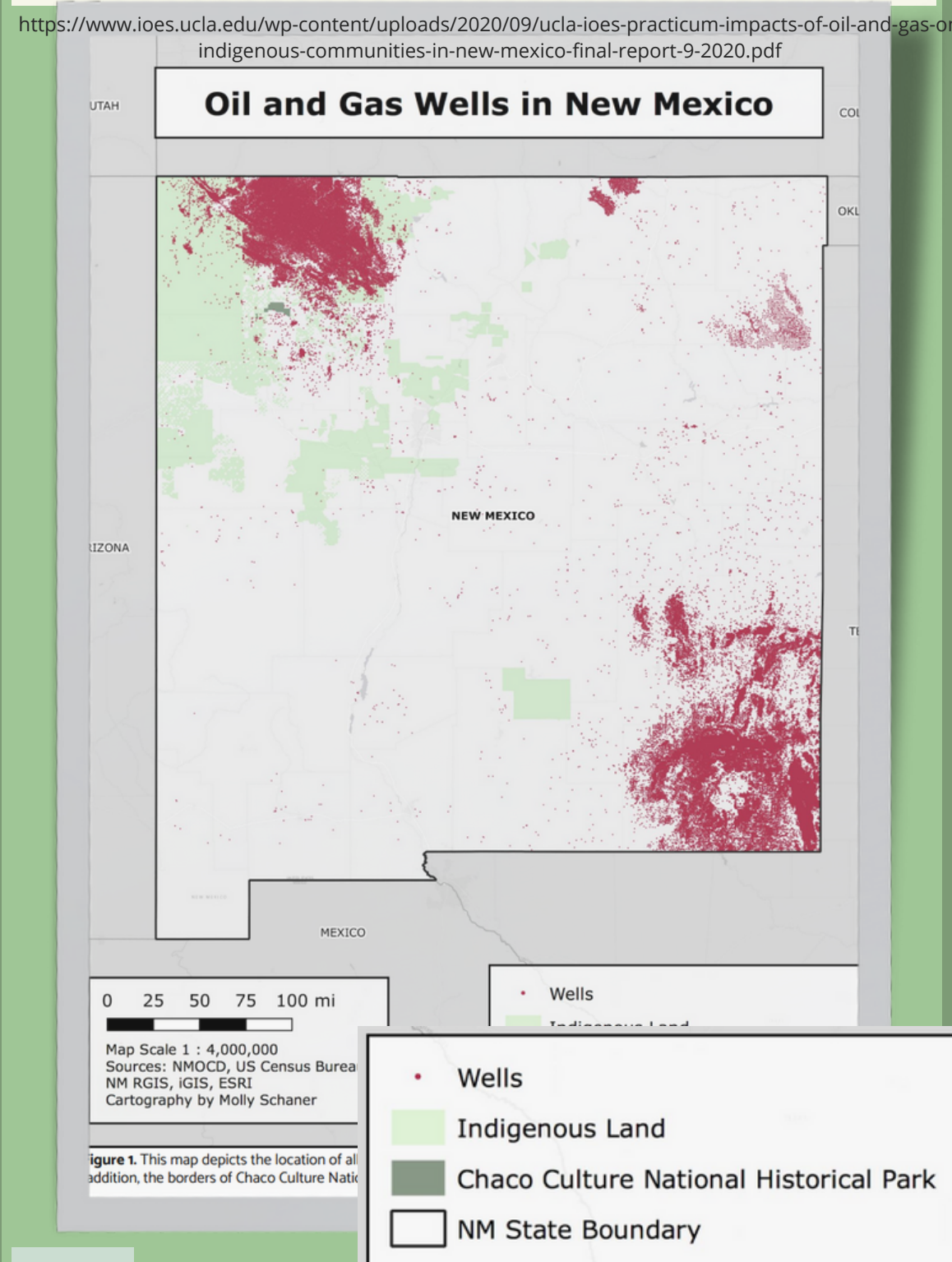


March 2018, Locals Protesting Health Hazards
<https://wildertheguardians.org/climate-energy/greater-chaco/>



“This is the Greater Chaco landscape..that's a sacred peak over there... and great houses that have yet to be discovered here, and they are destroying all this. Describes Atencio, board member of Diné CARE (environmental non-profit Navajo Nation org.)”

1) DISPROPORTIONATE INFILTRATION OF INDIGENOUS LANDS



91% of Greater Chaco public lands are leased for oil and gas drilling, and are generally located near indigenous lands.

Indigenous peoples are **2X** more likely to live within a ½ mile of gas and oil plants

2) HIGHER HEALTH RISKS

Oil and gas collection threatens the health and well-being of indigenous communities nearby.

Fracking is a specific type of oil and gas drilling that reaches hidden oil and gas. Workers insert a fracking slurry (water and potentially toxic chemicals) into the earth to break up rocks and release the oil and gas to the surface.

Hazardous byproducts of fracking: Methane, contaminated wastewater, air pollutants (benzene, ethylbenzene) and volatile organic compounds (VOCs)

Residents unjustly exposed to these toxic pollutants causes

- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Respiratory problems
- Cardiovascular disease
- Cancer

Health risks for indigenous communities are INTENSIFIED:

- Over **30%** of homes in the Navajo Nation can't access to clean water
- Most hospitals are an **hour** away.

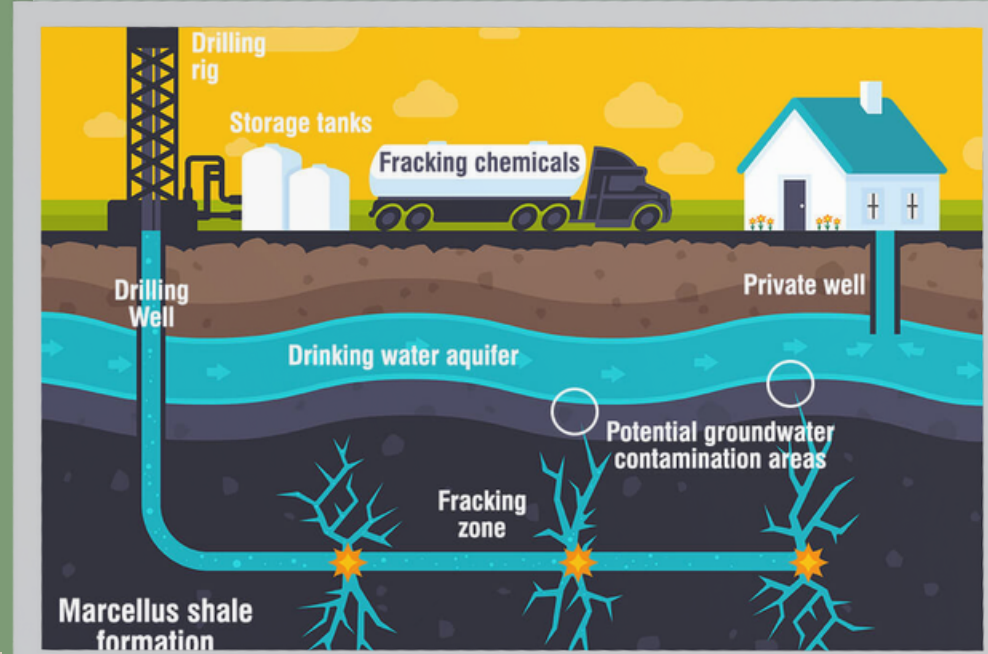
3) SHORTCOMINGS IN REGULATIONS

Oil and gas drilling in New Mexico is guided by **complex state and federal laws** which are carried out by varying agencies and facilities. This multifaceted system can cause **discrepancies**.

Clean Air Act of 1970: The main regulatory federal law

But, companies find **loopholes**:

- 2 state agencies give permits to companies, so it's hard to keep track of wells **illegally drilling** before receiving a permit
- These agencies don't record which drilling wells are associated with which facilities



Climate change EXACERBATED by lack of regulations:

Ozone formed from VOC's reaction w/ sunlight AND from truck emissions

CONCLUSION

This specific example is one of many instances in which marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted by environmental injustices.

To ensure equality and safety for all, it is necessary to strive towards **Environmental Justice (EJ)**. Article 12 of the Virginia Environmental Justice Act defines EJ as “the policy of the Commonwealth to promote environmental justice and ensure that it is carried out throughout the Commonwealth, with a focus on environmental justice communities and fenceline communities.” These **ideas are crucial to abide by**. There are also 17 principles to guide EJ such as: a focus on mutual respect, equal health care, and environmental education.

What does this look like applied to the Greater Chaco Region? Rather than two separate state agencies, a singular source would improve communication and records of gas and oil drilling. Also, shared leadership between agencies and tribal governments would give indigenous communities more voice on matters that directly affect their livelihoods.

Works Cited

Article 12. Virginia Environmental Justice Act, 2020, <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacodefull/title2.2/chapter2/article12/>. Article 12, the Virginia Environmental Justice Act carefully defines each broad term of the policy regarding environmental justice in Virginia. These definitions broadly encompass citizens of varying socioeconomic backgrounds, and relate to the big picture of Environmental Justice.

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"Impacts of Oil and Gas Drilling on Indigenous Communities in New Mexico’s Greater Chaco Landscape." *UCLA IoES*, 2020, <https://www.ioes.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ucla-ioes-practicum-impacts-of-oil-and-gas-on-indigenous-communities-in-new-mexico-final-report-9-2020.pdf>. This source, from the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability for WildEarth Guardian, outlines the historical indigenous context of the Greater Chaco region in New Mexico, provides statistics of oil and gas drilling prevalence and health risks, explains fracking, and includes a timeline of environmental regulations in relation to indigenous peoples of New Mexico.

"Oil and Gas Wells Contribute Fuel for Ozone Pollution." States News Service, Jan 14, 2013. <https://research.noaa.gov/article/ArtMID/587/ArticleID/1533/Oil-and-Gas-Wells-Contribute-Fuel-for-Ozone-Pollution#:~:text=A%20component%20of%20raw%20natural,a%20chief%20component%20of%20smog>. This article details how oil and gas drilling contribute to ozone pollution.