

FALL 2020

Field Notes

NEWS FROM WESTERN RESOURCE ADVOCATES

Victory for Renewable Energy in New Mexico

After years of work by WRA and partners, New Mexico's Four Corners communities are shifting from coal power to solar energy. **Pg. 2**

Kim Mitchell Works with Farmers in Arizona

Connecting growers with information about conservation programs helps farmers and keeps water in the Colorado River. **Pg. 4**

THE WEST IS ON THE BALLOT

For the past 30 years, the advocacy and hard work of WRA's dedicated experts and our passionate community of supporters have helped ensure a healthier, more wide-open, and wilder West.

From systematically working to transition from fossil fuels to clean energy, to protecting miles of rivers and habitat, we all can be proud of how we've helped protect this region. But this year has been like no other, and the challenges we face are increasing.

The Interior West is feeling pressure from every direction, and now more than ever, it's on us all to ensure that the future we envision for this region stays within our reach. The most important way you can do this is by making sure you vote—and get everyone you know to vote.

(continued on page 9...)



A Clean Energy Transformation in New Mexico's Four Corners

BY SASCHA GUINN ANDERSON

Western Resource Advocates' vision for New Mexico was always a state powered by clean energy, but the path forward has been complicated. The largest coal plant is located in the Four Corners region, an economically disadvantaged but fossil fuel-rich part of the state that encompasses part of the Navajo and Jicarilla Apache nations. The potential for renewable energy development there was large, but transitioning from coal would affect jobs, and require a significant change in political will, as well as a mindset shift about energy development.

Fast-forward through years of legal and political advocacy by WRA and many others: The San Juan Generating Station is now on a path to closure. This past July—in the midst of the pandemic shutdown—the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission unanimously approved a suite of renewable energy investments, including major solar energy development on Jicarilla Apache lands, to replace the energy and jobs the coal-fired plant provides.

The projects will invest over \$1 billion in the local school district and create 1,200 multi-year construction jobs in the Four Corners area.

The decision was a major victory after years of work by WRA and partners, and it will help transform the region's economy.

"This vote was a historic step forward in our efforts to diversify our state's economy by acting on climate," said Pat O'Connell, WRA's senior clean energy policy analyst in Santa Fe.

It also helps ensure that New Mexico will meet the goal of its landmark clean energy law, the 2019 Energy Transition Act, which requires public utilities to produce energy from 100% carbon-free sources by 2045 and all of the state's utilities to achieve 100% clean energy by 2050. The requirement is one of the most ambitious in the country.

Change in the Four Corners area began many years ago when Santa Fe-based attorney Steve Michel, deputy director of WRA's Clean Energy Program, started working to reduce pollution from the San Juan plant. Meeting the goal often seemed impossible. The coal plant, which opened in the 1970s, is a fixture in the region. At one time, its four units emitted 13 million tons of carbon dioxide a year, making it one of the largest sources of pollution in the region.

WRA's argument that a just transition from coal to renewable energy was economically bet-

ter for ratepayers and the utility ultimately led to the regulators' vote this summer for solar energy. In 2015, WRA entered into a legal settlement that allowed for the closure of the first two units at San Juan. The ETA's passage enabled the remaining two units to close, and this January, the state Supreme Court confirmed that state regulators must carry out the law.

New Mexico is still heavily dependent on fossil fuel development and has a long way to go to reach the level of carbon pollution reductions that scientists say are needed to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. But the ETA, the scheduled closure of San Juan, and the new investments in solar energy and battery storage are major progress.

While WRA's legal and policy advocacy played a central role, the success of the ETA and the solar energy transition has come thanks to an extensive coalition of supporters that includes conservation, business, and labor groups, as well as faith leaders, and community-based advocates, including the Native American Voters Alliance Education Project.

"We worked hard to build a diverse coalition, composed of a wide variety of stakeholders. It was important to us to ensure that all who would be impacted by the ETA had a seat at the table," said Sanders Moore of Policy Solutions Institute, who is a WRA consultant.

As the ETA is implemented, its benefits will grow. "It will mean a big paradigm shift," O'Connell said. "It will accelerate the move toward renewable energy."

The San Juan Generating Station coal-fired power plant in the Four Corners region of New Mexico has provided energy for New Mexico since the 1970s. When it was fully operating, the plant emitted 13 million tons of carbon dioxide a year, making it one of the largest sources of pollution in the region.



Darrick Lee, a technical instructor for the energy systems program at Navajo Technical University, which focuses on solar and wind power, says the transition from coal to renewable energy will create new jobs, strengthen the Four Corners economy, and help Navajo communities. Photo credit: Erin Azouz, Abiquiu, New Mexico

ORGANIZERS BUILD SUPPORT FOR CLEAN ENERGY

BY SASCHA GUINN ANDERSON

In mid-July, Shiprock, New Mexico, high schoolers Lorrissa Cason and Akaiasha Begay did something most students their age have never dreamed of: They testified to state utility regulators, urging them to approve a major solar energy and battery storage development in their community to create jobs and replace energy and tax revenue from the coal-fired San Juan Generating Station, which is scheduled to close.

"Now is the time to move from fossil fuels to renewable energy to make sure the planet we grow up in is livable," they wrote afterward in a letter to the *Santa Fe New Mexican* newspaper. "Please approve the 100% solar and storage plan now for our school and for our future!"

Later that month, the regulators unanimously approved the solar and battery storage projects, which will invest over \$1 billion in the local school district and create 1,200 multi-year construction jobs in the Four Corners area. It will be a sea-change for the community, which has produced the coal energy that has powered much of New Mexico for generations.

Conservationists, advocates, and organizers from the Four Corners worked hard to ensure their community's voices were heard as state leaders debated the area's energy transition—urging those leaders to be certain the community has the resources it needs for a just transition.

Joseph Hernandez, Diné energy organizer for NAVA Education Project, played a key role in engaging Navajo communities around renewable energy. Twenty-nine Navajo chapters are in the impacted area, and Hernandez and the NAVA Education Project, with the New Mexico Indian Affairs department and nonprofit organization Diné CARE, visited all of them within a month to listen, learn, and speak about the benefits of clean energy. These communities are diverse, and it was critical to understand the dynamics and needs of each, Hernandez said.

As the Four Corners region shifts from coal energy to renewable energy, workers will be able to get training for the new construction jobs.

That's important to Darrick Lee, a technical instructor for the energy systems program at Navajo Technical University, which focuses on solar and wind power.

"We're running out of natural resources, and renewable energy makes sense," said Lee, who advocated for the solar projects because he believes the expansion of renewable energy will create jobs and benefit Navajo communities. "There are lots of families who rely on coal and natural gas to heat their homes who could use wind or solar energy instead. There are places

on the Navajo Nation that are hard to reach that could be helped with solar, too."

While Lee sees a bright future for the Four Corners, many others in the region are still concerned.

Ahtza Dawn Chavez, NAVA Education Project executive director, said it will take time for people in the Four Corners area to embrace renewable energy after being dependent on the coal industry for generations. That's why it was important to her to make sure the transition would leave the Four Corners communities in a position "that's just to the people who are impacted."

"We have to make sure we invest in those communities so that they are not left by the wayside, like they have been with extractive industries," she said.

HELP WRA FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE

YOU can help limit global temperature rise to 2° C. Learn more: theclimatefix.org



45% by 2030
CO2 pollution WRA aims to cut from the power sector



94 million metric tons
CO2 pollution WRA's work will reduce each year



1.7 million metric tons
CO2 pollution YOU can remove for every \$1 donated to WRA



The energy picture in the West looked very different when Clean Energy Program Director John Nielsen joined WRA in 1995 fresh out of a graduate program in economics. Since then, the Clean Energy Program has, through advocacy in state legislatures and public utility commissions across our region, helped spur a transition in the West from coal and gas to wind, solar, and battery storage. This year, Nielsen celebrated his 25th anniversary with WRA. He reflected on his tenure and the changes he has helped oversee.

How did you come to work at WRA?
After I finished graduate school, I knew I wanted to come back West. People kept telling me about a position at this new organization. I'm glad that they pointed me in this direction. The person who really sold me on it was Rudd Mayer [former green marketing program director]. She had this energetic, persuasive way. I remember after I interviewed, she ran out the door and stopped me on the deck of the building and told me how great the organization was and how they were getting things done. And I left hoping they would hire me.

In 1996, you helped WRA write a report that highlighted the threat of climate change. Has it gotten easier to work on these issues since then?
I think there's greater recognition today than 25 years ago of the environmental challenges we face, especially around climate change. For the most part, there's more public and political will. I feel like the pace of change is accelerating, and we are making real progress. But there's still lots of work to do.

What are you proudest of?
It's been very rewarding to work with this crew. I'm proud of the fact that WRA as an organization has stuck to this issue for three decades. We were instrumental in developing the policy foundations for a clean energy transition at a time when not a lot of people were focused on that. And it really has laid the groundwork for the changes we are seeing now.

NEWS FROM THE FIELD

HELPING FARMERS WHILE KEEPING WATER IN THE COLORADO RIVER

When Congress passed the 2018 Farm Bill, it included provisions tailored specifically to help Western farmers, ranchers, tribes—and for the first time, irrigation districts—transition to water-efficient practices. The new programs help meet several important needs for farmers, irrigators, and the environment. Unfortunately, many potential applicants are too busy handling the day-to-day challenges of their farming operations to learn about the funding and other assistance.

That's where Kim Mitchell, Western Resource Advocates' Arizona-based senior water policy advisor, comes in.

Mitchell is a native Arizonan and hydrologist who has worked to solve some of Arizona's biggest water challenges. She knows how important water efficiency is to revitalize the Colorado River and benefit farmers struggling with more frequent drought brought on by climate change. She saw that by connecting farmers and irrigators with the Farm Bill's new funding and programs, she could help growers and advance WRA's goal of keeping more water in the river.

Mitchell assembled a fact sheet about the Farm Bill programs and started reaching out to state agriculture officials, decision makers, irrigation districts, producers, and Arizona's tribal communities.

"One of my main goals was to be Arizona-centric so it was relevant to growers here," Mitchell said. "I got very positive feedback because they felt there was a real gap between what this Farm Bill was providing to grow-

ers, the projects the producers would be interested in, and the information they were getting."

The COVID-19 pandemic hit just as Mitchell was starting her outreach, so she moved some of her meetings to Zoom. Still, she's been able to have a few—socially distant—field visits to learn more about how to help growers connect the resources in the legislation with their everyday challenges.

For example, she visited an Indigenous community interested in improving water conservation by transitioning from flood furrow irrigation to sprinklers or drip and adding other infrastructure improvements.

Mitchell is talking to other growers who are considering changing cropping patterns or transitioning to less water-intensive crops—like substituting cotton or alfalfa with wheat that uses about one-third less water. This can be unaffordable because such lower-value crops often bring in less income. The Farm Bill provides financial incentives, but growers have to know about the programs to take advantage of them. That's one reason Mitchell's outreach is so valuable.

"I'm acting as a liaison between the farmers and the U.S. Department of Agriculture staff so we can help growers put these new projects into action," she said. "I'm hoping to collect positive stories and feedback for congressional staff so we can ensure these programs continue to keep farmers in business, improve Arizona's water management, and ultimately help the Colorado River."



Protect the West for Years to Come

Did you know you can protect the West without giving funds right now? A common myth about planned giving is that it is only for a select few. But planned giving is for everyone! No matter your income, when you take time to plan, you create a secure future for yourself, your loved ones, and for the causes you care about. Your gift is generally deferred until after your lifetime, so your current income isn't affected. And you have the right to change your mind at any time. To learn more about giving to WRA, visit <https://westernresourceadvocates.org/giving/planned-giving/>. Better yet, contact Theresa Bushman at 720-763-3727 or theresa.bushman@westernresources.org.

PROTECTING 30 by 30



30x30 applies to waters as well as land. WRA is using new tools like outstanding waters designations to protect sensitive wetlands such as Nevada's Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge that play an essential role in supporting wildlife and filtering fresh water.

THE BIG CHALLENGE

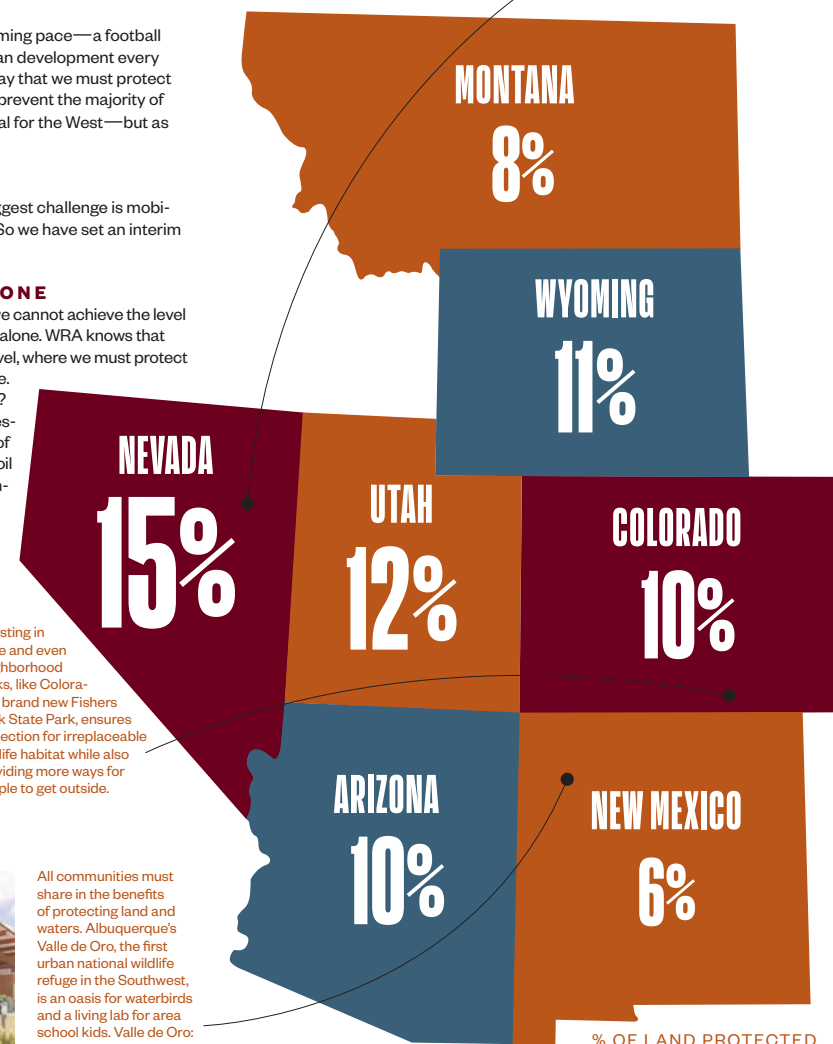
The United States is losing nature at an alarming pace—a football field's worth of natural lands are lost to human development every 30 seconds. Ecologists, led by E.O. Wilson, say that we must protect at least 50% of land and water for nature to prevent the majority of species from going extinct. This is WRA's goal for the West—but as the map shows, we need to get moving now.

WHY 30 BY 30?

Scientists and advocates realize that the biggest challenge is mobilizing political will to protect half the planet. So we have set an interim goal of reaching 30% protection by 2030.

HOW WE'RE GETTING IT DONE

National legislation has been proposed, but we cannot achieve the level of protection we need through federal action alone. WRA knows that real change happens at the state and local level, where we must protect special places like the ones in the images here. Other ways WRA is working to meet this goal? Protecting wildlife corridors, stopping unnecessary sprawl, and preventing the degradation of land, water, and air through smarter rules for oil and gas development. Learn more at westernresourceadvocates.org/30x30.



Investing in state and even neighborhood parks, like Colorado's brand new Fishers Peak State Park, ensures protection for irreplaceable wildlife habitat while also providing more ways for people to get outside.



All communities must share in the benefits of protecting land and waters. Albuquerque's Valle de Oro, the first urban national wildlife refuge in the Southwest, is an oasis for waterbirds and a living lab for area school kids. Valle de Oro: Collaborative rendering by Weddle Gilmore, Surroundings Studio, and Formative Architecture.

% OF LAND PROTECTED



WRA is proud to partner with photographers to showcase their work and the West's amazing landscapes. Will Strathmann of Denver shared this photo of a campsite under the pristine skies of Wyoming's Wind River Range during a summer backpacking trip. He writes, "The night skies of the Wind River Range are some of the darkest and clearest in the American West. It doesn't get much better than experiencing them during a new moon in the backcountry with old friends." See more at www.willstrathmann.com (@willstrath).



The West is on the Ballot

AS WE SIT HERE reflecting in early fall, all seven states in the region where WRA works are suffering. Colorado is battling five fires, and the Front Range is choked by smoke. The skies over Western communities from Las Vegas and Salt Lake City to Albuquerque and Casper are hazy from blazes as far away as California and have been experiencing record drought. And our neighbors who still lack clean running water or live nearest to fumes from power plants and highways are the ones who are suffering the most from the COVID-19 pandemic we're still struggling to contain.



The connection between our environmental health and our own health has become very real. In the words of a recent *Los Angeles Times* editorial: “We are living in the future that climate scientists have been trying to warn us about for years.”

Whatever your political party or your hometown, if you’re reading this, it’s a good bet that we share a love of the West’s land, air, and water. We know that elections have consequences; you can help shape the future of this region we call home. Please make a plan to vote to protect it.

The issues impacting the West are big and dynamic: addressing climate

Our work with allies across the Colorado River Basin has helped develop a forward-thinking water plan that accounts for population growth in the face of shortening water supplies. But much more remains to be done.

It’s up to us now to decide our future. And we need local, state, and federal policymakers on our side. Without them, the challenge becomes exponentially more difficult. This is why the November elections loom so large. In the face of environmental impacts we can see and breathe, these issues are closer to a tipping point than ever before. Without our stewardship and collective action, the knowledge

“You can help shape the future of this region we call home. Please make a plan to vote to protect it.”

change, protecting the Colorado River from unnecessary burdens like the Lake Powell Pipeline, and ensuring *all* communities have access to outdoor adventures—to name just a few.

WRA’s vision for the West is one powered 100% by clean energy, a Colorado River that runs to the sea, and over 50% of lands and habitat protected and connected in perpetuity. We know how to do this—our collaborative work with policy makers and utility companies across the West has already built a blueprint to avoid the worst impacts of climate change and build a prosperous future that’s powered by clean, renewable energy,

and blueprints that we have to help solve these problems will risk being just that: plans, often blocked by powerful opposition.

We can meet this challenge. November 3rd is an Election Day with generational consequences. We can take an active role in creating a new future for the West. Who are the next bold leaders sharing our vision? Who will step up and defend our open spaces, fresh water, clean air, and protect us from the impacts of climate change? It’s up to us to decide.

On Election Day, we all need to *vote like the future of the West depends on it*.

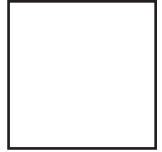
Because in many ways, it does.

Previous spread photo: Williams Fork Fire, by Kurt Monigle, @kurtmonigle, Fraser, Colorado.

Photo at left: Lake Powell, by Mylo Fowler, @navajomylo, Fruit Heights, Utah.



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From Your Field

Walking toward sunrise at Long Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park, by Jason Swann, WRA Western Lands policy fellow, of Denver. We'd love to keep sharing photos by our community of supporters! Please contact brendan.witt@westernresources.org for more information.

