

JANUARY 2022

Field Notes

NEWS FROM WESTERN RESOURCE ADVOCATES

Community Over Competition in Climate Justice

Learn how WRA is working with community leaders to right environmental justice wrongs. **Pg. 2**

Safe, Affordable Drinking Water in Indigenous Communities

WRA leadership supports addressing inequities in water access for tribal communities. **Pg. 6**

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO OUTDOOR ACCESS

Watching the sunrise from atop a 14er, hiking through the fall leaves, rafting along white-capped rapids with friends, or relaxing in the cool grass of a local park. Across the West, getting outside to enjoy our abundant natural landscapes is often thought of as one of the greatest benefits of calling the West home.

Unfortunately, some communities lack access to the experiences that many of us take for granted. A bill passed in the 2021 Colorado legislative session, with support from Western Resources Advocates, is helping address inequities in access to the outdoors and provide opportunities for outdoor experiences and nature-based education into the future.

(continued on page 9...)





COMMUNITY OVER COMPETITION IN CLIMATE JUSTICE

Millard Chacon was instrumental in ensuring community came together around the enactment of HB 21-1266.

All across the West people are living the climate crisis and being affected by extreme drought, wildfires, and air pollution. We need strong action to address the manifold impacts of climate change, and poll after poll shows that Westerners agree. While every person is impacted by climate change, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) bear a far higher burden because of exposure to toxic co-pollutants, environmental racism, exclusion from decision making, and economic precarity that compromises resiliency.

Western Resource Advocates works across the West to reduce carbon emissions in line with the scientific consensus of what is necessary to prevent catastrophic warming. In Colorado, WRA is committed to working with advocates spanning environmental justice, conservation, health, and business interests to make meaningful progress on reaching the state's near-term climate goals.

Progress requires building a strong and diverse coalition to fight for action, specifically in partnership with communities most harmed by pollution. WRA joined with advocates from more than 100 organizations during the 2021 legislative session to pursue important policies aimed at addressing climate pollution and

advancing environmental justice in Colorado. Renée Millard Chacon was a vital leader in that fight.

Millard Chacon was the youth program development coordinator at Spirit of the Sun and is currently co-founder of Womxn from the Mountain, both of which are Indigenous womxn-led nonprofits in Colorado. A mother and educator with a master's degree in transformative education, Millard Chacon, along with her colleagues, fights for future generations by providing Indigenous cultural resiliency education, supporting ally and accomplice training using Indigenous perspectives, working with elders who are leaders in environmental justice and experts on the harms of sustained pollution, and so much more.

Millard Chacon, who is Diné, Mexica, and Filipina, grew up in Colorado and has a family history that long predates its statehood.

"Unfortunately, we've been fighting generation after generation for true representation and, honestly, equitable justice as well," she says.

Millard Chacon has been involved with a number of organizing efforts across the country, and she didn't expect to find support to address longstanding barriers in Colorado that she and her elders faced when confronting climate impacts

and the issues affecting disproportionately impacted communities. Instead, she found a diverse group of local partners willing to listen, be legitimate allies, and work together to craft some of the state’s most important climate bills of 2021.

“I went from giving public comment at city council meetings to being asked by the coalition to provide a perspective on behalf of my community,” she says. “Coalition members actively listened, not to respond or hijack our narratives, but to better understand the issues and include our voices in equity decisions.”

In partnership with legislative champions Senator Faith Winter and Representative Dominique Jackson, Millard Chacon worked with WRA and the coalition to advocate for the introduction of two landmark climate bills in the 2021 legislative session: House Bill 21-1266, to begin addressing environmental racism and pollution issues affecting disproportionately impacted communities in Colorado, and Senate Bill 21-200, to set limits for greenhouse gas pollution across various sectors and put the state on a path to reach its climate change goals.

While HB 21-1266 made its way through the legislature, SB 21-200 stalled after a veto threat by Governor Jared Polis. That moment stands out for Millard Chacon.

“When you have a chance to bring transformative change and it might be vetoed, it feels like your whole existence is being invalidated,” she says.

However, legislators and the coalition refused to back down as negotiations with the governor’s office stretched into the eleventh hour of the legislative session. Ultimately, they reached a compromise. Important elements of SB 21-200 — including enforceable pollution limits for the electric, oil and gas, and industrial sectors — were folded into the environmental justice bill, HB 21-1266, which was the final piece of legislation to pass the 2021 General Assembly.

“I went from having this deep, disheartening, stomach-sinking feeling to suddenly realizing that they are actually going to listen this time,” Millard Chacon says. “They have to hear us, because it’s not just us, it’s everybody.”

With HB 21-1266’s enactment, Colorado will start to make progress righting some of its environmental justice wrongs. The new law legally defines “disproportionately impacted communities” and specifies that penalties for air quality violations by polluters must be invested back into the communities that experienced the harm. It also establishes an Environmental Justice Advisory Board, which includes members from disproportionately impacted communities, codifies best public outreach and engagement practices, and requires the creation of a comprehensive statewide environmental justice plan.

From Millard Chacon’s perspective, the creation of a new environmental justice ombudsperson position within the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment is a major success of HB 21-1266.

“This is one of the first bills that specifies if you are proposing a project that increases the negative impact on communities and creates disproportional harm, then you need to go back to the drawing board or don’t go there at all,” she says.

What made the coalition successful? Millard Chacon says it comes down to putting community over competition. She was honored to see so many groups come together, understanding that each brought to the table a strength to dismantle harm that had been done and to help rebuild where affected communities see a need.

Despite the passage of HB 21-1266, Colorado still has a long way to go to reduce emissions at the pace and scale required to

“WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE WHEN INDUSTRY IS HARMING OUR COMMUNITIES JUST FOR ECONOMIC BENEFIT AND STAND UP FOR THE LEGITIMATE PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY FOR COMMUNITY.”

protect the lives and livelihoods of the West.

Notably, HB 21-1266 does not establish a pollution reduction limit for the transportation sector, which is now the largest source of greenhouse gas pollution in Colorado. And, as Millard Chacon explains, deeper issues have yet to be addressed, such as holding polluters financially accountable for the damages they have caused, creating enforceable protections for communities, and ensuring decision making is not solely focused on businesses’ bottom lines, but rather on public health and wellbeing.

“We really need state agencies to stop giving preferential treatment to industries,” Millard Chacon says. “We need to recognize when

industry is harming our communities just for economic benefit and stand with the legitimate public health and safety for community.”

When it comes to future action on climate justice, Colorado does not have a second to waste. Every day the state delays transformative action, a higher level of cumulative warming is locked in, making it harder for Colorado to achieve science-based goals and forcing disproportionately impacted communities to continue bearing unacceptable levels of harmful pollution.

“If Governor Polis wants to show that he truly cares about people, he needs to show that he is more aligned with community needs and less with industry,” says Millard Chacon. “I’m asking our leaders to put people over profits and get at the root of our problems, not evade them anymore.”

For Millard Chacon, the ability to secure equitable climate victories in the face of strong opposition shows that Colorado has reached a tipping point at which elected leaders can no longer turn a blind eye to the injustices long experienced by disproportionately impacted communities.

She is also hopeful that diverse groups can continue to come together as true allies to protect nature and future generations from the impacts of climate change. As the work continues, it will be important to ensure additional voices with lived experience continue to be centered in the work.

“It was one of the first coalitions that I’ve worked with that I was proud to be a part of and am able to say that I’ve felt heard and included,” says Millard Chacon. “At the same time, there is a long way to go.”

Millard Chacon notes that while she is part of the Indigenous community, it’s not a monolith, and equitable change is about rebuilding for all communities. Part of the coalition’s success comes from acknowledging and understanding intercultural misperceptions and moving forward to get things done.

While it can be difficult for Coloradans and other Westerners not to feel despair about the unfolding climate crisis, Millard Chacon — who says she has no choice but to stay hopeful — wants people to continue to come together authentically to support healing and prepare

future generations for climate change impacts.

“I pray that we continue to move in all of the good directions that we need to protect ourselves and our biosphere,” she says. “I hope that this is a reawakening to our responsibility to future generations.”

Colorado and the West need leaders like Millard Chacon to help make sure climate policies and solutions are truly equitable, and through partnership we can accomplish so much more together. WRA is committed to this work, and we are grateful for partners like Millard Chacon.

Millard Chacon is standing in front of Colorado’s capitol building, where she pushes to create change for communities disproportionately impacted by climate change. Photos by Rachel Ellis. See more at rachellis photography.com.



**LEARN MORE ABOUT
MILLARD CHACON'S
WORK THROUGH THE TWO
WOMEN-LED NONPROFITS
SHE WORKS WITH.**



Spirit of the Sun
SpiritOfTheSun.org

**WOMXN FROM THE
MOUNTAIN**

**Womxn from the
Mountain**
WomxnFromThe
Mountain.com

THANK YOU TO OUR 2021-2022 SPONSORS!

We are so grateful to these sponsors for their support and commitment to fight climate change to sustain the environment, economy, and people of the West. Your partnership matters and is making a difference.

SIGNATURE SPONSOR



SUPPORTING SPONSORS

- Conservation Colorado
- Denver Water
- Frontline Public Affairs
- Great Outdoors Colorado
- Keyes & Fox
- Kind Design
- Rachio
- SCARPA

Sponsorships make an important impact on WRA's efforts to advance clean energy, protect air, land, water, and wildlife, and sustain the lives and livelihoods of everyone in the West. Now is your opportunity to sponsor the future by supporting WRA's work annually and letting WRA sweat the details. Together, we can create and implement evidence-based solutions and ongoing accountability.

We'd love to partner with you for our 2022-2023 Annual Sponsorship Program! WRA's sponsorship program renews annually on April 1. Contact Elizabeth at **720.763.3743** or **elizabeth@westernresources.org** today to discuss which sponsorship level works best for you.



Tackling Inequalities in Appointed Boards

Appointed water boards in Colorado make crucial decisions about managing water, with impacts to rivers across the state. However, appointed board members frequently fail to reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of the communities they represent.

Research shows that having diverse perspectives leads to more-innovative solutions to our most pressing problems. Climate change and water resource challenges benefit from having diverse and inclusive teams working to solve these complex issues.

In 2021, Western Resource Advocates commissioned a report, prepared by Dr. Violeta Garcia at Ecosistema Design LLC, to gain a deeper understanding of the current status of diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion of five appointed water boards in Colorado and to propose recommendations for improvement.

The report identifies best practices for water boards who are aiming to be more inclusive, such as increasing representation, adopting more inclusive policies, expanding mentorship for new members, and promoting accessibility.

It also makes recommendations for advocates to begin balancing inequities, including the following:

- Meet each board where it is by listening to board members, responding to their needs, and taking each board's unique circumstance into account. This is important because of the wide variation in the current status of diversity and inclusion among boards.
- Advance policies that allow a wider range of community members to serve on water boards and remedy the historical exclusion of people of color from boards and commissions.
- Create resources to make information about water boards more widespread and easily accessible.
- Invest in a diverse leadership pipeline, and recruit and develop diverse candidates for water boards.

Going forward, WRA will work to amplify the report's important findings and collaborate with partners to advance its recommendations. As water boards across Colorado become more representative and inclusive and better reflect the diversity of Colorado's residents, we will all benefit from innovative solutions to address our most urgent water challenges.

SAFE, AFFORDABLE DRINKING WATER IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Ensuring access to safe, affordable drinking water in Indigenous communities is a critical issue facing the West.

Western Resource Advocates board members Anne Castle and Heather Tanana have been working to shed light on the problem and to develop potential solutions. Tanana was the lead author on a report released by the Tribal Clean Water Initiative, an organization co-led by Castle and water expert Bidtah Becker. The report details inequities in water access for tribal communities in the Colorado River Basin.

Nearly half of the households on Native American reservations do not have access to clean, reliable water or basic sanitation. Furthermore, Native American households are 19 times more likely than white households to lack indoor plumbing, according to the Tribal Clean Water Initiative.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to these inequalities. Lack of access to running water, among other disparities, made Indigenous communities more vulnerable to the virus. Indigenous peoples continue to have the highest hospitalization and death rates from COVID-19 of any ethnic group.

The Tribal Access to Clean Water Act, introduced into the U.S. Senate in July 2021 and sponsored by New Mexico Senator Martin Heinrich and Colorado Senator Michael Bennet, would begin to address this problem. It would provide much-needed funding to four agencies that have authority and programs for expanding access to clean water on Native American reservations. The bipartisan infrastructure bill (INVEST in America Act), signed into law by President Biden in early November 2021, includes some components of the Tribal Access to Clean Water Act, with significant appropriations for the Indian Health Service and the Environmental Protection Agency.

And although the CARES Act, the COVID relief bill that was approved in the spring of 2020, allowed Indigenous communities to use part of the relief funding to build or repair water infrastructure, huge gaps still need to be addressed.

WRA applauds these legislative efforts to solve this dire problem and ensure that all communities in our region have an equal opportunity to thrive.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT: TAHLIA BEAR



Tahlia Bear recently joined Western Resource Advocates as its first Indigenous peoples engagement manager. It was a landmark moment for WRA, and her work reflects an important focus as WRA seeks to develop more inclusive solutions to climate and conservation issues and to advance the health and vibrance of all people and communities in our region.

As WRA's first Indigenous peoples engagement manager, why would you say is it so important for WRA to begin contemplating Indigenous issues as part of our policy work?

Indigenous peoples have been the caretakers and inhabitants of North America since time immemorial and have valuable knowledge, insight, and expertise of the environment. Yet they have been historically left out of key conservation decisions and policy making. Across the WRA region are 76 federally recognized tribes. From an equity perspective, that makes it critical to engage Indigenous perspectives and views to shape our conservation work in order to make our environment and communities healthier, safer, and more resilient.

What is it about these issues that motivated you to want to do this work at WRA?

Curtailling climate change is one of the biggest challenges of my generation. I am an enrolled member of the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation who is also half Navajo, and communities like mine are the first to feel the disproportionate effects of climate change. Being a part of the staff at WRA means that I can utilize my unique perspectives and skills to work on issues that are meaningful to Indigenous communities and advance conservation goals at the same time.

What are the main projects you plan to focus on as you begin your work?

My focus will span across WRA's three areas of work — clean energy, healthy rivers, and Western lands — to cultivate authentic partnerships with Indigenous communities, governments, leaders, citizens, and other nonprofit organizations in the region. Specifically, I will be working in the months ahead to advance WRA's priorities related to the Colorado River, just and equitable transition for communities in the Four Corners affected by the closing of coal plants, and engagement of Indigenous communities in the 30x30 Initiative, which aims to protect 30% of all Western land by 2030.



*Taking in the
view from a bluff
overlooking the
Grand Canyon and
Colorado River.
Photo by Akela on
Stocksy. See more
at akela.world.*





Breaking Down Barriers to Outdoor Access

Experiencing our wild landscapes and flowing rivers is a part of our culture in Colorado. These places fuel a booming outdoor recreation economy throughout our region and are a valuable asset for communities looking to transition away from extractive industries.

However, access to outdoor spaces and experiences is not shared equally by all. Diverse and low-income communities, both urban and rural, face significant barriers to accessing public lands, open spaces, and parks. Many of our communities lack physical proximity to green space or affordable transportation to our region's recreational opportunities. In addition, diverse and low-income communities may not feel comfortable or safe in those places. They may encounter financial barriers that limit their access to recreational activities and equipment.

That's where Colorado's Outdoor Equity Grant Program comes in. Established by passage of Colorado House Bill 21-1318, the program provides grants to Colorado groups to directly help diverse and low-income youth and their families overcome access barriers to outdoor experiences and educational opportunities. State Representative Leslie Herod sponsored HB 21-1318, and it was supported by a broad array of state legislators, decision makers, and community leaders.

WRA was integral in the creation and passage of this important bill. We joined a BIPOC-led coalition of community advocates, brought together by Next100 Colorado, to provide policy recommendations for the program. As part of a core policy team that collaborated with Rep. Herod and Colorado Parks and Wildlife on policy development, WRA helped draft the bill and championed HB 21-1318 through the legislative process. The bill was passed with strong bipartisan support and was signed into law last summer. The legislation follows the precedent set by similar programs in California and New Mexico, but it is the first to establish a permanent, sustainable source of funding that can reliably provide outdoor opportunities for underserved youth for generations to come.

The Outdoor Equity Grant Program is funded by proceeds from the Colorado lottery, starting with \$750,000 in 2021 and growing to \$3 million annually over the next four years. Following the passage of the bill, the Colorado legislature added an additional \$1 million to help kickstart the program. Allocation of these funds is guided by an independent board to ensure the money supports meaningful opportunities to introduce the next generation of recreationists, conservationists, stewards, and advocates to the outdoors and closes the "nature gap" to ensure all our communities have equitable access to natural spaces.

The establishment of the Outdoor Equity Grant Program is a major win for outdoor access in Colorado. But WRA isn't stopping there. Our team of policy experts is working with state legislators, management agencies, and local decision makers to translate the Colorado Outdoor

Diverse and low-income communities, both urban and rural, face significant barriers to accessing public lands, open spaces, and parks.

Equity Grant Program model to states across our region. New legislative efforts will build similar programs and improve existing ones so that all underserved youth and their families have a direct, sustainable, well-managed resource for outdoor access now and for years to come.

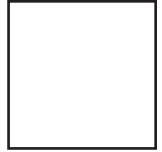
WRA is committed to working toward a future where all our youth and communities across the West, regardless of their income, zip code, or historic inequities, have opportunities to experience the incomparable outdoor spaces of our region. By building off this success, we are helping to break down the barriers that stand between diverse and low-income communities and the lands and waters our region is known for, so that they can be enjoyed equally by all.

Opposite page: A hiker relaxes inside a tent in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, right outside Aspen, Colorado. Photo by Marisa Jarae. See more @marisajarae.





2260 Baseline Road
Suite 200
Boulder, CO 80302



5701 Clay Avenue
Unit A
Austin, TX
78756



From Your Field

Long-time supporter Juan Madrid's two daughters enjoy the Gunnison River on a sunny summer day.