

For immediate release: Oct. 5, 2021

NM groups to lawmakers: Fossil-fueled hydrogen a climate threat, not a solution

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NM groups to lawmakers: Fossil-fueled hydrogen a climate threat, not a solution

On Tuesday, a coalition of New Mexico community, environmental, and justice organizations warned state and federal lawmakers of the risks of diving head-first into fossil-fueled hydrogen projects. [The groups' letter](#) provides guidance on the context and safeguards that must be enacted before hydrogen projects are considered in the San Juan Basin, and in New Mexico generally.

The oil and gas industry has lobbied for billions in taxpayer funds for hydrogen in the coming federal infrastructure bill, and states, including New Mexico, are scrambling to win those funds for "hydrogen hubs." But hydrogen derived from fossil gas presents significant climate and health dangers, driving new methane, carbon dioxide and other emissions as well as a massive new market for fracked gas, just when scientists tell us it is most urgent to dramatically scale back our consumption of fossil fuels.

"Northwest New Mexico has an opportunity to transition to renewable energy, severing historic reliance on fossil fuels. That should be our priority. We have been here before. We have seen the fossil fuel industry attempt to repackage fossil fuels with concepts such as 'clean coal' and natural gas as a 'bridge fuel' over the past 15 years which has contributed to our climate crisis and continuing carbon and methane liabilities. This approach has cost taxpayers billions of dollars and worsened pollution and adverse public health impacts in Northwest New Mexico, as some foresee with fossil fuel hydrogen," said **Mike Eisenfeld, climate and energy program manager, San Juan Citizens Alliance.**

Hydrogen production is already responsible for 3-4% of the world's greenhouse gas pollution, more than all of Germany's emissions. Nearly all current hydrogen production involves an energy-intensive process fueled by methane and emitting carbon dioxide. The fossil-fuel industry has been promoting projects that use carbon capture to reduce that considerable climate impact, labeling this "blue" hydrogen. Research has found that even with a slick marketing sheen, this process still causes climate damage. As critical as state and federal methane safeguards are, even New Mexico's own estimate of the impact of proposed methane rules was within the range where researchers found that fossil-fuel hydrogen would be more harmful to the climate than gas at a power plant.

In addition, all hydrogen, even renewable-generated green hydrogen, produces health-damaging nitrogen oxide (NOx) when combusted, by some estimates six times more than burning methane. NOx pollution can cause serious health impacts including asthma and increased chance of respiratory infections. NOx is also a precursor to particulate matter and ozone, which are also harmful to the respiratory system. Hydrogen and carbon-dioxide transport both present major safety issues, as does storage of such massive amounts of CO2.

"The Navajo Nation has recognized that climate change is real. The Navajo Nation Council passed a Climate Change Adaptation Plan through legislation in 2019," said **Jessica Keetso, Tó Nizhóní Ání organizer.** "However, because the Navajo Nation is at an economic disadvantage, especially since coal is going away from the region, the Nation could be persuaded to back gas hydrogen if fossil-fuel interests start making promises of phantom money to the right people. It is important for Navajo leadership to remember that this year alone, the Navajo Nation has suffered major losses due to extreme weather events ranging from loss of life in catastrophic flooding to water scarcity and water restrictions imposed on Diné people by tribal entities. It is even more important to recognize that the Navajo Nation still has 40% of its population living in housing without electricity or indoor plumbing. The Navajo people are still trying to figure out how we'll get water for ourselves and our livestock today. The Navajo Nation is a testament to how the fossil fuel industries have failed the economy, the environment and the people. If hydrogen further exacerbates the climate crisis we are experiencing on the Navajo Nation already, then Navajo has no business pursuing, investing in, or endorsing hydrogen."

Prioritizing fossil gas hydrogen could also divert and delay needed state investments in renewable energy infrastructure, limits on carbon emissions, methane reductions, a transition to 100% electric vehicles, and making New Mexico families' homes more affordable, safe, and energy efficient. These investments —

not taxpayer-subsidized handouts to the gas industry — are the pathways to a climate-resilient clean-energy economy that provides stability for workers and families.

"New Mexico should develop a comprehensive strategy to decarbonize the entire state economy, and fit hydrogen into the plan where it will do the most good," said **Travis Madsen, transportation program director at the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project**. "Hydrogen will likely be an important tool to clean up parts of the economy that clean electricity and batteries can't efficiently reach. But the plan should come first."

"We simply cannot afford to create new climate pollution. Even the more optimistic 'blue hydrogen' proposals aspire to only 90% carbon capture. When scaled up to the level of production that fossil industries are aiming for, that 10% creates a significant climate impact. For electricity, renewable energy and storage can do the job more efficiently and affordably with zero carbon emissions — not 10%, but zero," said **Sierra Club Rio Grande Chapter Director Camilla Feibelman**.

In their letter, the organizations point to dangers of prioritizing fossil gas hydrogen over critical and necessary climate solutions including efficiency, electrification, and renewables and storage development.

"New Mexico must prioritize comprehensive, durable, and enforceable climate legislation to light the pathway to a thriving, resilient New Mexico that benefits all of New Mexico's workers and families," said **Erik Schlenker-Goodrich, executive director of the Western Environmental Law Center**. "We don't need a distraction that involves risky bets of taxpayer resources that serves to further entrench the power of fossil fuel corporations."

Fossil gas is a risky bet even relative to niche markets that may demand hydrogen because within a decade those markets will likely be supplied not by fossil gas hydrogen, but hydrogen derived from water with renewable energy.

Hydrogen harvested from water in a process powered by renewable energy — "green" hydrogen — has promise in hard-to-decarbonize applications like cement and steel production and long-haul freight. But electricity directly generated by renewable energy is always more efficient than hydrogen derived from a process powered by renewables and then combusted. New Mexico is a water-strapped state, and drought is driving irrigation limitations and wildfires. This drives the question of whether using our scarce water resources to manufacture hydrogen is the best choice.

"As an Indigenous organization working in the San Juan Basin, we ask New Mexico's leaders from the Governor's office, state legislature and our federal delegation to exercise caution when pursuing Hydrogen as a solution to the climate crisis. Using fossil gas hydrogen would also require sequestering carbon dioxide in communities that have multiple generations of compromised health problems. It is important that frontline and impacted communities are centered in these policy decisions. Investments should not be made into a hydrogen economy when throughout the Navajo Nation region many people still do not have running water or electricity. There needs to be serious investments in the areas of education, housing, general infrastructure and broadband while ensuring that we are building a strong clean energy workforce. On behalf of our Earth Mother and future generations, we can not support a false solution," said **Joseph Hernandez, Diné energy organizer for NAVA Education Project**.

"Any consideration of making New Mexico a hub for hydrogen must center principles of equity and justice," said **Dr. Virginia Necochea, executive director of the New Mexico Environmental Law Center**. "For too long, low-income communities of color have borne the brunt of extractive industry; it is critically important that any decisions about hydrogen development in our state must factor how such a proposal would impact historically overburdened communities. We have an obligation to address these concerns before moving forward."

"New Mexico has started down the road of a just economic transition away from an extractive economy and toward one that is regenerative," said **James Povijua, policy director for the Center for Civic Policy**. "Development of hydrogen projects must not divert resources away from reducing impacts of climate change on overburdened communities or detract from the important work of developing an economy that works for all New Mexicans and does not destroy our air, land, and water."

"New Mexico already has a methane pollution problem that the state is working to get under control," said **Gwen Lachelt, Executive director of Western Leaders Network**. "We need to be investing in and prioritizing clean energy and emissions reductions, before assessing whether hydrogen should be a part of the energy transition."

"It's textbook industry bait-and-switch. Oil and gas knows its industry is in decline on the global scale and is looking for any and all methods to market its products under the guise of the growing renewable energy economy," said **Lucas Herndon, energy and policy director for ProgressNow New Mexico**. "Hydrogen being a 'green' fuel does equate to the hydrogen industry being renewable or even remotely 'clean.' It is simply not."

"Hydrogen development is wholly dependent on natural gas fracking-based development. Hydrogen development would only increase oil and natural gas fracking in Northwest New Mexico. Such development will poison land, air, water and destroy sacred places," said **Mario Atencio, board member of Diné Citizens Against Ruining our Environment (C.A.R.E.)** "The poisonous and cancer-causing gas and oil fracking development is already impacting the health of Diné people and this 'blue/green hydrogen' malarkey only *greenwashes* the fact that the Diné homeland will continue to be an energy sacrifice zone."

"CCAIE supports 'green hydrogen' for sustainable economic development that moves New Mexico away from dirty fossil fuel production and towards clean, affordable energy and jobs. The current proposal for a hydrogen hub and the Act must incorporate sufficient evaluation of the hub's greenhouse gas emissions, and analysis of impacts on New Mexico's communities and the environment," said **CCAIE attorney Cara Lynch**. "Currently, the environmental community was not consulted in the creation of the Act, an oversight that should be corrected."

"New Mexico needs a comprehensive climate policy package requiring decarbonization pathways for every major emitting sector. Any discussion of hydrogen should be nested within this broader decarbonization effort," says **Noah Long with the Natural Resources Defense Council**. "Where hydrogen does play a role, it must be held to the highest standards in order to protect our climate and the public health of New Mexico's communities."

"Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham needs to stop supporting false climate solutions that only serve to prop up the fossil fuel industry," said **Jeremy Nichols with WildEarth Guardians**. "It's time for the Governor to get real on climate and move New Mexico away from oil, gas, and coal toward a just and equitable transition to truly clean energy."

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