



For Immediate Release

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**New Mexico Environmental Law Center Announces
Recipients of its EJ Awards for 2021**
Toxic Polluter Award for 2021 Goes to Hilcorp Energy

Santa Fe, NM—The New Mexico Environmental Law Center (NMELC) announced the winners of its Annual Environmental Justice Awards for 2021. The winners were celebrated during the NMELC’s Annual Member Appreciation & EJ Awards event held on Friday, December 10th over Zoom. The four awards given out include the tongue-in-cheek “award” for Toxic Polluter. NMELC staff presented a mock “invoice” to the Toxic Polluter of the year for harming the environment and the health of New Mexicans.

Awards included the Karl Souder Award (for water protection), the Jeanne Gauna Community Environmental Advocacy Award, and the inaugural Youth Earth Protector Award.

Here are the winners for this year’s NMELC EJ Awards for 2021:

Karl Souder Award for 2021

Rich Abitz

Rich Abitz is a geochemist who has worked tirelessly with Native communities to protect their groundwater, including with ENDAUM since 1995 on the HRI case. Rich has also worked with other communities in Texas to protect groundwater from ISL mining. Dr. Abitz’s analysis and testimony helped lay bare the lie perpetuated by the U.S. NRC and the mining industry that groundwater can be restored after ISL mining operations. Dr. Abitz has also made valuable contributions to the body of knowledge that demonstrates that ISL uranium mining is neither safe nor environmentally friendly.

The Karl Souder Water Protection Award honors an outstanding individual or organization that has made significant contributions to the protection of New Mexico water. Karl Souder was a hydrologist who spent his career working to protect New Mexico’s water, particularly its ground water.

Jeanne Gauna Community Environmental Advocacy Award for 2021

Beata Tsosie Peña

Beata Tsosie-Peña is a brilliant and passionate community organizer who works fiercely on behalf of New Mexico's communities in many realms, advocating tirelessly for environmental justice, reproductive justice, food sovereignty, and community health. As coordinator of Tewa Women United's Health and Environmental Justice program for 13 years, Beata fought for environmental justice in the face of exploitation and contamination from the national labs, mining operations, and other sources, often working in collaboration with coalitions such as Communities for Clean Water and Frack Off! Greater Chaco.

The Jeanne Gauna Community Environmental Advocacy Award is given to New Mexicans who have given significant time and effort toward grassroots advocacy for the welfare of our state's communities, especially through the linkage of environmental health and community well-being. Jeanne Gauna was a fierce environmental justice warrior and former director of the SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP). This award has been given by the Law Center since 1999, and its name was changed from Community Advocacy Award to the Jeanne Gauna award in 2003. Individuals or organizations can be nominated.

Youth Earth Protector Award for 2021

YUCCA (Youth United for Climate Crisis Action)

YUCCA (Youth United for Climate Action) gives us hope for a livable future worth fighting for. Led by passionate and dedicated youth community organizers from across New Mexico, YUCCA challenges systems that perpetuate climate crisis and widespread environmental injustice, through grassroots organizing; political pressure; and local, regional, national, and global climate actions, including generating broad awareness and participation in the General Climate Strike and 7 Days of Resistance in September. YUCCA is based in Northern New Mexico and is part of Earth Care.

This is the first year the Law Center will be giving out this award, which goes out to a youth (age 20 or younger) who has demonstrated great leadership and vision in protecting New Mexico's air, water and/or land for current and future generations. Individuals or organizations can be nominated.

Toxic Polluter Award for 2021

Hilcorp Energy

Hilcorp Energy earned this dubious distinction by doing what it does best: being a profit-mongering bad neighbor. Hilcorp is the largest gas and oil producer in the San Juan Basin, where it operates over 15,500 wells across 2 million acres. Of the entire oil and gas industry, Hilcorp is the nation's top methane emitter, and much of the methane and other asthma- and cancer-causing chemicals Hilcorp spews into the air pollutes the communities of thousands of New Mexicans, who are forced to breathe Hilcorp's toxic

fumes day in and day out. Not only does Hilcorp cavalierly poison communities, but it also flagrantly violates environmental regulations, in New Mexico and beyond.

Each year the Law Center bestows the Toxic Polluter of the Year Award to a person, business, or industry that has shown extraordinary disregard for New Mexico's environment and the communities that live in it. Previous Toxic Polluter awardees have included: Gary Johnson (2001), Pete Domenici (2003), Susana Martinez (2017), OCC/OCD (2018), LANL (2019) and Homestake Barrick Gold (2020).

Dr. Virginia Necochea, Executive Director of NMELC said, "It is our honor to present this year's Environmental Justice awards to Rich Abitz, Beata Tsosie-Pena, and YUCCA. The NMELC Environmental Justice Awards have been in place since 1992 and are our way of recognizing the powerful work of community advocates who work tirelessly in defending and upholding environmental justice across the state of New Mexico."

Rich Abitz, upon receiving the Karl Souder Award for Water Protection, said, "I feel humbled by the receipt of the Karl Souder Water Protection Award because I realize that Karl Souder was more than a hydrologist and businessman. Karl was also a compassionate human being dedicated to protecting New Mexico's most important resource—water! I never had the honor of meeting Karl, though over the past 30 years I have been fortunate to work with several outstanding professionals that, like Karl, are dedicated to protecting New Mexico's water resources and human health: Doug Meiklejohn and Eric Jantz with the NMELC; Geoff Fettus, initially with NMELC, but now with the Natural Resources Defense Council; and Chris Shuey with the Southwest Research Information Center. Working with these gentlemen and several tribal nations enriched the professional and spiritual aspects of my life. I am truly honored to receive this prestigious award. Let me close with the wisdom of the Navajo Diné – *to ei iina* – water is life! Thank you."

Beata Tsosie-Peña, upon receiving the Jeanne Gauna Award for Community Environmental Advocacy, said, "I want to just ask everyone with all my heart and love to keep showing up for each other. Keep showing up for our Mother Earth, for our waters, our land, for our future generations. Let's keep honoring everything that our ancestors worked to give us today to pass on to us, these life-sustaining ways of existing here and being. This isn't solitary work, we're all in it together. I look forward to future collaborations and future victories, stopping environmental violence and environmental racism. We are going to abolish militarism in our state some day. Thank you very much, New Mexico Environmental Law Center."

Seneca Johnson, cofounder of YUCCA (Youth United for Climate Crisis Action), said on behalf of the organization, "Thank you so much. It really means a lot to have our work acknowledged and uplifted and celebrated in this way. We are made up of young BIPOC peoples from all around New Mexico. We've all grown up watching the

devastation of our planet and worrying about what that means for our communities, and what that means for our kids, if we have any, and our grandkids. It's very easy to give up when you see so many things happening nationally, locally, state-wide, on every level and very little action accompanying it. In our work we recognize the reciprocal relationship that we have with Mother Earth. She's provided for us and cared for us and it's our duty to do the same for her. Being rooted in this respect and this love is really vital in creating a better life for our present and our future and doing our work in a good way. We will continue to really give our all in the fight for climate justice and a just transition to a livable and sustainable future. I really look forward to how we can make this vision come true together."

NMELC's annual event included live flute music performed by [Andrew Thomas](#) as well as poetry by [Artemisio Romero y Carver](#). The music and poetry greatly enhanced the celebration of the three environmental justice champions.

The New Mexico Environmental Law Center has been defending environmental justice since 1987. It is our mission to work with New Mexico's communities to protect their air, land and water in the fight for environmental justice.

For more information about NMELC, go to <https://nmelc.org/> or <https://www.facebook.com/NMELC>.

The poster features a scenic background of a river winding through a valley with mountains in the distance. At the top, it reads "NEW MEXICO ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTER" in green, followed by "2021 Environmental Justice Awards" in large, bold, dark blue letters. Three award categories are listed vertically, each with a circular portrait of the winner: 1. "Karl Souder Award for Water Protection" with a portrait of Rich Abitz; 2. "Jeanne Gauna Award for Community Environmental Advocacy" with a portrait of Beata Tsosie-Peña; 3. "Youth Earth Protector Award" with a group photo of YUCCA members. The YUCCA logo and full name are at the bottom right of the award list. The NMELC logo and name are in the bottom left corner.

NEW MEXICO ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTER

2021 Environmental Justice Awards

Karl Souder Award for Water Protection
Rich Abitz

Jeanne Gauna Award for Community Environmental Advocacy
Beata Tsosie-Peña

Youth Earth Protector Award
YUCCA
(Youth United for Climate Crisis Action)

New Mexico Environmental Law Center

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