

MY VIEW MIGUEL ESCOTO

Climate change is a human issue

By Miguel Escoto

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On the struggle for farmworker labor rights, community organizer César Chávez said: “The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about the people.” One of the misconceptions about the climate crisis is that it’s not a human-centered issue.

From my home in El Paso — a community bordering both Mexico and New Mexico, I can clearly see the interconnectedness of climate, immigration and health justice. On a global scale, the climate crisis is creating “climate refugees” worldwide because of increased sea levels, changing weather patterns and droughts. By 2050, 143 million people from South Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa will be displaced from their homes. My hometown, which saw around 4,000 border crossings in a single day in 2019, is, and will continue to be, ground zero for this sort of climate migration from Latin America.

The crisis plays out domestically as well. Thanks to oil and gas extraction, the Permian Basin — which spans through southeastern New Mexican counties — has the highest concentration of methane emissions in the entire U.S. The levels are three orders of magnitude higher than Saudi Arabia.

In 2019, toxic wastewater from fracking operations rained down on the home of a family in Carlsbad without penalty. In New Mexico, more than 130,000 people live within a half-mile of oil and gas development. Research shows that frontline communities in this “impact zone” — commonly low-income, mixed-status, communities of color — suffer disproportionate health impacts. Counties that host the majority of oil and gas production all received “D” or “F” grades for ozone pollution from the American Lung Association.

The data about the oil and gas industry’s impact on health is undeniable. Many heartbreaking,

peer-reviewed studies link one's proximity to oil and gas infrastructure to adverse health impacts: higher rates of cancer at half-mile distance; higher rates of respiratory damage at 3,280-foot distance; higher rates of adverse birth outcomes at six miles; and, even higher rates of birth defects at up to 10 miles of distance.

Even people who live far from oil and gas extraction are still harmed by it. Oil and gas-prompted ozone concentrations in Lea, San Juan, Eddy and Doña Ana County (the one closest to me) are near or above the federal government's suggested limit of 70 parts per billion.

Part of the problem is that the climate crisis is ironically easy to ignore when you're trying hard not to look. Air pollutants and greenhouse gasses might be invisible to the naked eye — although organizations such as mine, Earthworks, watch industry to make these emissions visible. Nonetheless, the fossil fuel industry's impact on climate refugees and frontline communities' health is unshakably tangible.

We still have an opportunity to reimagine our economy. We can make the transition to clean, renewable energy in a just and equitable way that addresses the social, economic and racial injustices that are linked to climate change. Thankfully, New Mexico is making some progress on rules to reduce methane and other air pollution from oil and gas operations — but not enough. The chronic underfunding of environmental state agencies does not help our cause.

What we do in New Mexico will determine the fate of the climate and its victims. It's time our decision-makers think beyond the next boom-and-bust budget cycle and start addressing the human consequences of New Mexico's reliance on the fossil fuel industry.

Miguel Escoto is a social justice and environmental organizer based in El Paso. He is West Texas field associate with Earthworks. This is the latest in an occasional series of columns on the impact of climate disruption on the people and places of New Mexico.