

Earth Day is no longer about Celebration: Uranium Contamination Across America, Holding the Silent Killers Of Environmental Destruction Accountable

By [Kevin Zeese](#) and [Margaret Flowers](#)

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The findings of the [most recent IPCC report](#) are sobering. We have [15 years to mitigate climate disaster](#). It is up to us to make a major transition to a [carbon-free, nuclear-free energy economy](#) within that time-frame. Big Energy and our plutocratic government are not going to do it without effective pressure from a people-powered movement.

Earth Day is no longer about celebration. We are making Mother Earth sick by using extreme methods to extract fuels from her mountains and from beneath her surface and by massive spills of oil, chemicals and radiation. We must mobilize ourselves to take action now to create clean renewable energy and to restore the damage we have done.

More people are getting this concept. This year, there are several major campaigns around Earth Day, for example the [Global Climate Convergence](#) and the [Cowboy Indian Alliance](#) camp in Washington, DC. We celebrated Earth Day by launching [a new national campaign to clean up the thousands of abandoned uranium mines](#) (AUMs) scattered throughout the Great Plains and West Coast.

Uranium: The Invisible Killer

In the days leading up to the launch of [Clean Up the Mines campaign](#), our team of eleven organizers toured Southwest South Dakota to learn more about the AUMs. Our tour was led by Charmaine White Face, a scientist and coordinator of Defenders of the Black Hills, who took us to various sites and brought her Geiger counters. There are 272 AUMs in South Dakota that continue to emit radiation, radon and toxic elements into the air, water and land. The mines were abandoned by corporations like Kerr McGee and Atlantic Richfield who walked away from them when the [Uranium Rush](#) that started in the early 1950s was over. We described this in more detail in our previous article about how [uranium mines are poisoning the breadbasket of America](#).

The Northern Great Plains Region of Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, North and South Dakota contain more than 3,000 AUMs. There are more than 1,000 AUMs in Arizona and New Mexico. In total, in the 15 western states there are estimated to be [more than 10,000 AUMs](#). [One in 7 people in the western US live within 50 miles](#) of an AUM, according to the EPA. This is a national environmental crisis – a silent Fukushima – for which responsibility needs to be taken.

[Researchers have found](#) that the Madison Aquifer, which provides drinking water to 90% of South Dakota's population, has been contaminated by uranium. In addition to South Dakota, the Madison Aquifer is beneath the ground in parts of Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, and Nebraska. It is not only aquifers that are impacted, the water run-off from AUM's affect the Grand River, Moreau River, Belle Fourche River, Cheyenne River and Missouri River.

Due to uranium contamination in the Colorado River, [the drinking water supply for half of the population of the Western US](#) may already be radioactive. Mining near the Colorado River, which flows through the Grand Canyon, [threatens the drinking water supplies of millions of people](#) in cities like Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas. Samples from 15 springs and 5 wells in the Grand Canyon [exhibited dissolved uranium concentrations greater](#) than the EPA maximum for drinking water.

Toxic, radioactive [substances from AUMs take the form of dust which travels with the wind for hundreds of miles](#). Uranium is a silent health threat. As it breaks down, it releases radon, an odorless gas that causes lung disease and cancer. It also emits gamma radiation and radioactive alpha and beta particles, which can cause severe damage to cells if they are released from within the body after when a person drinks contaminated water or inhales contaminated dust. The dust can blow into streams or mix with nearby soil, spreading radioactive contamination.

The adverse [health impacts](#) of radiation include [cancer](#) and other organ damage, especially during fetal development and in young children. Higher incidences of childhood leukemia, respiratory failure and kidney disease have been recorded near uranium mine sites. Uranium in water has been associated with [increased kidney disease](#).

The health impacts of this silent killer are widespread. Yet, where is the accountability for the corporations who profited from these mines? Where are the federal and state governments responsible for the environment and the health and safety of the population? Those responsible are not being held sufficiently accountable.

South Dakota Tour

Our first stop on the tour was Mount Rushmore which has 169 AUMs within a 50 mile range. We pulled over at a scenic area outside of the monument and measured the radioactivity in the soil which was 15 microrems/hour (52.5 Counts/minute). We entered the park and interviewed [White Face](#) in view of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln. She told us that the more than 2 million people who visit Mt Rushmore each year are unaware that they are being exposed to radiation. In order to raise awareness, we donned hazardous material suits and walked with a large banner that said "It's time to clean up the mines!"

The next day we visited Riley Pass, located on National Forest Service land; it is one of the largest AUMs in South Dakota. The deadly effect of the mine was apparent from a distance. As we approached the bluff, the tree line ended abruptly at the edge of the mine. When we parked and walked towards the mine, we encountered a warning sign which said "Danger!" and "Stay out, Stay alive."

[The Forest Service acknowledges the risks at Riley Pass, writing](#) that approximately 250 acres have been identified for needing reclamation and clean-up. They describe the site as containing elevated radioactive materials, and heavy metals including onsite mine waste,

fine-grained particles which are readily dispersed by wind and surface water erosion. Concentrations of these dangerous toxins range up to “ten times higher for sediment samples in impacted drainages and several hundred times higher for mine waste samples.” They also note that livestock drink water and eat grasses that are toxic from the uranium mine.

A [2007 action memorandum on Riley Pass done by the Forest Service](#) found that the site posed “an imminent and substantial endangerment to public health, or welfare or the environment.” There has been minimal inadequate action taken to contain the toxins from the AUMs. The actions taken do not prevent leaching into the groundwater and are more akin to landscaping than to the type of action that is needed. A recent [settlement of a lawsuit against Tronox](#), the corporations responsible for the AUM, will provide \$179 million for Riley’s Pass clean-up. This inadequate amount is the only funding for South Dakota out of the \$5.2 billion settlement. It leaves the other 271 mines without any provisions for clean-up.

From Riley’s Pass we went to Ludlow, a nearby town. An elementary school is located a short 200 meters from an AUM. We could see the high rounded wall of the open pit. Using the Geiger counter we measured radioactivity throughout the school are, the highest were in the soil next to a small picnic table at the children’s playground. It read 44 microrems/hour (154 Counts/minute) and the air tested at 34 microrems/hour when the wind was still. We calculated that the radioactivity is close to four times the level allowed for families to return to Fukushima.

During the tour, we met people at road stops and during our visits to the mine areas. People from every community spoke of health problems which are commonly related to uranium exposure and their high level of concern over the lack of information about the AUMs and action to remediate them. Many said they had been reassured that the risks were low. However, based on the presence of the mines, the numerous reports of high rates of cancer and disease and the high readings that we measured, we believe that independent studies should be performed to accurately assess the magnitude of the risk and the health impacts.

The People Need to Mobilize to Clean Up The Mines!

On Earth Day, [the launch](#) of the [Clean Up The Mines!](#) campaign took place near Red Shirt Village on the banks of the dead and poisoned Cheyenne River. The 295 mile long Cheyenne River which runs through Wyoming and South Dakota is damaged by thousands of AUM’s in Wyoming according to a 2006 study by the South Dakota Department of Environmental and Natural Resources Water Monitoring Program. The residents can’t use the river and can’t drink the water from their wells because of uranium and arsenic contamination.

White Face told us that she tested the river water previously for life and found one crayfish after dragging a net for a hundred feet. A local resident pointed to the dead Cotton Wood trees on the river banks and ranchers told us of their difficulty obtaining clean water for their livestock.

Dozens from the community joined with members of organizations including Defenders of Black Hills, Clean Water Alliance, Dakota Rural Action, Peace Pagoda, Veterans for Peace, the Global Climate Convergence and Popular Resistance at the Cheyenne River Bridge. We posted signs stating “Warning, Radioactive River” to raise awareness of the toxic contamination of the Cheyenne River caused by AUMs because there are no permanent

signs.

White Face said:

“For the American public to be exposed to radioactive pollution and not be warned by federal and state governments is unconscionable; shame on the American federal and state governments for allowing their citizens to be placed in such danger for more than 50 years and not stopping the source of the danger. It is a national travesty.”

In reaction to the Clean Up The Mines! project, a spokesperson for the South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources, [told the Associated Press](#) the state doesn't have an abandoned mine program. He refused to comment on the health impacts but claimed the uranium levels were low in South Dakota water. His statements are inconsistent with the experience of people living in the state.

Sandra Cuny Buffington, from the Red Shirt community, a rancher with cattle in the Bad Lands, lived at the river until it wasn't possible anymore because of contamination. She spoke of high rates of cancer in the area. “We know we are contaminated but where are we going to go? I don't know of any other life than the one that I have lived.”

“Abandoned uranium mines are devastating to the health of local populations,” explained Dr. Jill Stein, former Green Party presidential candidate who is a physician specializing in environmental health issues, “The mines threaten not only our health but our economies and ecosystems as well.” Stein, who participated in the Earth Day event as part of the kick-off of the ten day [Global Climate Convergence](#), went on to say “We are here to insist on cleaning up the mines and transitioning to a clean renewable energy system. This transition can put American back to work while vastly improving our health. The health savings alone will pay for the costs of this transition.”

Tarak Kauff, a member of the Board of Directors of Veterans for Peace described uranium mining as part of a “war on Mother Earth” and said

“It is up to us, an awakened public, ordinary black, brown, white and red people working together to demand, to insure that these toxic highly radioactive abandoned mines be cleaned up - for us and for future generations.”

Helen Jaccard, volunteer with Clean Up The Mines, described uranium, as a problem from “cradle to grave” saying “From mining, to milling and processing, to nuclear bombs and energy, with the left-over depleted uranium turned into weapons and the waste products that have no grave, the only safe place for uranium is in the ground.”

White Face concluded,

“Currently no laws require clean-up of these dangerous abandoned uranium mines. We are letting Congress know: It is time to clean up the mines! We value persistence. We will employ a variety of tactics including legislative and judicial avenues to hold the government and corporations accountable for their negligence and community-based actions to raise awareness and clean up the

mines.”

The legal precedence set by the recent settlement with Tronox adds more legitimacy to this struggle. There needs to be greater accountability. You can get involved by joining [Clean Up the Mines!](#) Take action to spread awareness of the problem and write to your members of Congress to demand that accurate studies are performed, the mines and water supplies are cleaned up with citizen oversight and those who have been sickened receive the treatment they require.

Accountability for Silent Killers

Exploring the legacy of uranium mining – for Earth destroying weapons of mass destruction and risky nuclear energy – reminded us how far humans have come in environmental destruction. It also showed, once again, how all is related. The Gaia theory of the Earth as a living being where all is connected is evident in the uranium toxicity that spreads through water, air and food

There is a [growing movement that links native peoples with the descendants](#) of those who colonized them. Now, many non-natives follow the lead of native peoples against fossil fuel and mineral extraction throughout the continent. It is this kind of solidarity and unity that will not only clean up the mines but will also make even greater changes in our economy, environment and government.

The toxicity of AUMs also reminds us of the cost of [living under the rule of an illegitimate government](#) where money, not the people, rule; of big finance capitalism that puts profit ahead of people and planet – and is enabled by the corrupt corporate government. The experience of the uranium mines shows us that even if it means people will die younger than they should, profit is king when we live under the ‘rule of money.’ It shows us we have an even larger task – ending a plutocratic oligarchy and creating a real democracy where the people rule.

AUMs are one example of many. This week expert testimony before the National Transportation Safety Board said that oil train [tanker leaks were inevitable](#). And, the nation is being covered in tar sands, gas and oil pipelines – all with terrible records of leaks. Yet, the federal agency that regulates pipelines and railroad transit of oil is [cutting its already too small staff by 9%](#). The plutocrats will get their profits and the Earth will be plundered and polluted.

And, of course it is not only environmental destruction. This week we are seeing Obama’s new chairman of the FCC, who has served as a telecom industry lobbyist for two decades, pushing the end of net neutrality and a tiered system of Internet access, one for those with the money to pay for fast service and a slow lane for those who cannot. ([Take action to stop the destruction of the Internet here](#); the next two weeks are critical.) The plutocrats will get wealthy while the Internet as we know it will be undermined.

Earth Day, which [started out as part of an environmental movement](#) that helped create major changes, has become a celebration of picnics, co-opted by corporations rather than education and mobilization to confront the environmental crisis. Even the [Petroleum Institute pushes further environmental destruction](#) under the Earth Day banner. We need to remember how [the first Earth Day linked labor to the environment](#) and realize that the necessities of the people are connected to a healthy planet. At a time when we are seeing

mass species die-off, destruction of the ocean and other water sources as well as a planet threatened by climate change, Earth Day needs to become about urgent transformation.

[Robert Koehler writes](#) about what we need to do in his reflection on how we have lost a decade of environmental collapse and cannot afford to lose another one:

“We need intense activism along with structural analysis and the building of alternative, sustainable lifestyles. We need wisdom, reverence and creativity that we pull up from the depths of our uncertainty. Author [Joanna Macy](#) calls it ‘the Great Turning.’ It’s a shift in consciousness that aligns social healing, economic fairness and an end to war with environmental sustainability. And the time to make it happen is running out. We can’t afford to lose another decade, or another twenty minutes.”

It is time to face the destruction wrought by the human species on the planet; and take responsibility by mobilizing to reverse the destruction of Gaia. Together, is the only way we can do it.

This article is produced by [Popular Resistance](#) in conjunction with [AlterNet](#). It is a weekly review of the activities of the resistance movement. [Sign up for the daily news digest of Popular Resistance, here.](#)

Kevin Zeese, JD and Margaret Flowers, MD are organizers of [PopularResistance.org](#); they co-direct [It's Our Economy](#) and co-host [Clearing the FOG](#). Their twitters are [@KBZeese](#) and [MFlowers8](#).

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[Margaret Flowers](#)

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