

The People's Docket for Environmental Justice: Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada, and the Tribal Homelands Thereof

A synthesis of central themes and action items from the People's Hearing, energized in Tucson, AZ, prepared by Dr. Kyle Whyte, a witness at the hearing, and the Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School.

Introduction

The **Speak Easy, Speak Free People's Hearing** took place on September 4-5, 2025, in Tucson, Arizona. Nearly 190 people, mainly from the southwest region and its Tribal nations, gathered to testify on their severe concerns about how government inaction on pollution and the high costs associated with energy and climate change are endangering their health and economic well-being. Attendees represented Tribal nations, grassroots organizations, and community-based initiatives across Arizona, New Mexico, and Nevada.

Convened by members of the former White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council (WHEJAC) at a packed room at the Hilton DoubleTree Tucson Convention Center, the event was first announced on August 1, 2025, building on the momentum of the WHEJAC's first People's Hearing held in Greensboro, NC, on June 10-11, 2025. The Tucson hearing sought to serve as "a space for dialogue where community representatives and their partners... can testify to the threats to their health, land and work... [helping to] lay the groundwork for policies and movements that will secure a cleaner, healthier, and economically and culturally vibrant future." An immense response followed the public notice, as people registered quickly, exceeding the venue's capacity to accommodate all who wished to attend and testify. National environmental justice (EJ) leaders also traveled to Tucson from Puerto Rico, Florida, Michigan, Washington, D.C., California, and New Mexico to witness the testimonies and take national action on behalf of the concerns raised.

Community Testimonies and Tribal Leadership

Speakers described the deep suffering their communities have endured, including cancer, asthma, lupus, kidney failure, and cardiovascular disease, resulting from exposure to toxic chemicals and concentrated pollution from military and defense operations, utility companies, mining companies, and contractors for major infrastructure projects such as Project Blue (a proposed data center facility in Tucson). For example, Guadalupe (Lupita) Zepeda from Yolia Botanica shared how her family "battled severe asthma and cancer living in one of Tucson's most poisoned zip codes," where "children [are] hospitalized three to five times more than the state average." She spoke to the legacy of industrial pollution that continues to define her neighborhood, noting that their "communities are now federal Superfund sites poisoned with industrial solvents like TCE and forever chemicals. What good is the foundation if the ground beneath it is poisoned?"

At the same time, testifiers brought innovative solutions, often rooted in the knowledge, ingenuity, and sovereignty of Tribal nations. Carl Etsitty from Black Mesa United - Dził Yíjiiin Bee Ahota' (BMU-DzBA) highlighted community-led solutions for land restoration and sustainable growth after the closure of the Peabody Energy coal mine, in the Dziłjiiin [Black Mesa] region, where he is from. He described initiatives outlined in their Community Land Use Plan, to "fully fund and enforce community-led [and] observed reclamation efforts, require local level consultation and implementation... prioritize restoration of grazing lands, water sources, and cultural sites... support development of regional resiliency centers with health clinics... [and invest in] community agriculture, medicine plants restoration, wildlife habitat revitalization," among other policy and funding solutions. Throughout the hearing, both Tribal and non-Tribal individuals emphasized the importance of respecting the leadership of Tribal nations in the pursuit of ending environmental injustice.



The people of Arizona and Tribal nations thereof also brought a special energy to the crowded room. Former WHEJAC member Jade Begay highlighted the impact of tribal representation at the hearing, observing, “When I look out, I see my relatives, I see lots of Native and Tribal input, and I think [that is] a really important observation.” While people were called to testify on a range of environmental justice issues, this is one of the first national gatherings where Tribal nations came up in nearly every testimony, whether testifiers spoke directly to Tribally-led solutions, to Tribal values of responsibility for the land, or to raise painful histories of land dispossession and the desecration of places sacred to Tribes for religious and subsistence purposes.

The People’s Hearing revealed many further layers of coalitional vibrancy and efficacy. For example, the people of the “No Desert Data Center Coalition” in Tucson have claimed an initial victory against Amazon, halting the proposed development of the Project Blue data center that would have depleted water and other natural resources, increased pollution, and driven up consumer energy costs, without providing any benefits to the Tucson communities. Jeff Wirth from the No Desert Data Center Coalition described how communities “came together as a coalition to protect our water and land, energy usage concerns, and the community concerns about Amazon Web Services’ support of ICE... We were loud, coordinated, wearing red in solidarity with other communities fighting data centers across the country... People power was present and visible.”

Testimony from this initiative underscored how the fight against extractive and polluting corporations has united people across the region, creating new friendships and alliances that have renewed the sense of urgency to address environmental justice.

The atmosphere at the hearing reflected a sense of new beginnings rooted in the wisdom of the land, the knowledge and values of Indigenous peoples of the place, and the grit and vision of longstanding community leaders who have refused to yield to the violence and harms of extractive industries and weak government protections. Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income people have consistently demonstrated the impact of their unity in organizing, influencing elected officials, enacting policies, passing laws, and raising public awareness.

Policy Demands and Pathways Forward

Elected and campaigning officials, including Tucson Mayor Regina Romero, Pima County Board of Supervisors member Andrés Cano, Arizona State Representative Betty Villegas, and U.S. House of Representatives member-elect Adelita Grijalva, were present to witness the testimonies. Testifiers spoke directly to these officials, outlining what they could do to better serve their constituents and communities. They called for an end to mining operations, industrial manufacturing, and extractive infrastructure projects that deplete natural resources, contaminate the air and water, harm public health, and violate Indigenous treaty rights. Speakers highlighted policy priorities, which included reforming the General Mining Law of 1872, expanding the Clean Water Act to protect both groundwater quantity and quality, and strengthening labor protections for workers exposed to toxic chemicals and extreme heat. They further pointed out the failure of governments to implement permitting reforms, enforce existing permit regulations, and uphold equitable and inclusive systems for public participation and involvement in state and local decision-making.

Testifiers framed these fact-based concerns within the enduring reality that Arizona has yet to repair the harms of its historic assault on and dispossession of Tribal nations. They were equally direct in articulating the solutions needed, calling for greater funding and resourcing for Native-led climate initiatives and land stewardship practices, as well as for free, prior, and informed consent before approving projects on Tribal lands. Their testimony outlined pragmatic solutions that would secure healthy, clean, safe, culturally vibrant, and economically promising interventions that could be implemented now.

Conclusion: Unity and the Road Ahead

The People's Hearing in Tucson marked the second time the People's Environmental Justice Advisory Council (PEJAC) travelled from afar to hear local testimonies from frontline communities dealing with a variety of environmental harms and industrial polluters. It complemented the hard work of the organizations that came together during the inaugural People's Hearing in North Carolina, as previously mentioned. Held in June 2025 in Greensboro, this hearing brought together almost 500 frontline residents, EJ organizers, and advocates from the southeast and other parts of the United States to share lived experiences, bear witness, and amplify community-driven solutions to environmental injustices.

As with this previous hearing, the Arizona event also featured national leaders and members of the PEJAC, who, in Arizona and elsewhere, have implemented change on many of the same issues that hinder environmental protection and discourage community- and Indigenous-led solutions. LaTricea Adams, former WHEJAC member from Memphis, Tennessee, remarked after the first day of testimonies in Tucson: "I'm really grateful for an opportunity not just to listen, but also to focus on the patterns that we see. It's insidious, it is colonization, it is extraction, and it's really important that we're able to connect the dots... that we fight to the bloody death to create a better world for public health because, at the end of the day, that's the bottom line."

Maria Lopez-Nuñez, a former WHEJAC member from Newark, New Jersey, also emphasized the need for sustained civic engagement and accountability: "Democracy is not just about voting. If you are a teacher, you don't go in front of the classroom, say you're all in, and then leave [the students] after. You stay with them every single day, show up to class with them, so continue educating the people we put in office, regardless. I encourage us to talk to both Democrats and Republicans because it doesn't matter what affiliation they have—our community is in need at this moment, and we always need to keep building that democratic muscle."

With a combined total of 700 participants, nearly 120 testifiers, and a growing audience and media presence, the People's Hearings are building national alignment around key calls to action and policy change. Across regions, participants are advancing shared goals, whether in reforming permitting and siting processes for polluting facilities, ensuring that communities own and govern clean energy, or developing infrastructure to mitigate the effects of extreme weather. The PEJAC has vowed to continue this work, using testimony, fellowship, writing, networking, and resource building to crystallize a coordinated national movement.

Lifelong advocate and Tribal leader from the region, Carletta Tilousi from Carefree, Arizona, also a former WHEJAC member, amplified this commitment, putting it simply and compellingly, "The air is something that we all share and we all breathe and it's circulating right now...so we just really need to unite together to continue this voice...As we move forward, we just have to be more united than ever before."