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Fort Belknap

Environmental racism on Montana reservation

By Deirdre Guthrie

In 1994, when I first arrived in Montana to work for Red Thunder Incorporated (RTI), now known as Spirit Mountain Cultural Clan, on the Fort Belknap Native American reservation, environmental racism was a fairly new term.

Organ cancer rates among Navajo teenagers living near uranium spills were reported to be 17 times higher than the national average, there were high levels of lead poisoning among African-American children in inner city housing projects, and birth defects and high cancer rates among Latino children of farm workers exposed to pesticides.

In 1992, the Southwest Network, an eight-state coalition of hundreds of multi-racial community-based organizations and individuals, formally accused the EPA, which has "trustee" responsibility for Indians through its Department of the Interior, of environmental racism by allowing harmful industrial and government facilities to be disproportionately located on reservations, as well as in communities of color and low income.

At Fort Belknap, evidence that Pegasus Gold Inc., a

multinational cyanide heap-leach gold mine, threatens water quality and the health of humans and wildlife (not to mention Native cultural and sacred sites) in the Little Rocky Mountains, has finally been recognized by the Billings Federal Court. Now, the former Canadian-based multinational must pay a landmark \$36.7 million dollar pollution settlement over the next five years to come into compliance with state and federal water quality laws.



A carved-out mountain—Johnathan Smart