

Four die at Pine Ridge reservation while federal government ignores pleas for flood aid

written by M. Tiahui
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Steve Pourier and Lacey Pourier standing on the road to their house on the Pine

Ridge Reservation. The road is now rubble after they spent thousands to upgrade it. Photo: Lakota Law Project

This spring, extreme weather devastated reservations in several Midwest states. Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Cheyenne River, Ponca, Standing Rock and several more reservations were all impacted by blizzards and flooding.

While farming and other communities in the region have been hard-hit, already strapped reservations — and, in particular, Pine Ridge in South Dakota — are bearing the greatest burden from the record flooding.

On Pine Ridge, home of the Oglala Lakota (Sioux) Nation, families were stranded for weeks as already poor roads became and stayed impassable. More than 1,500 people were displaced, and it will take millions of dollars to repair the damaged infrastructure. Hundreds of people ran out of food and drinking water while waiting for help.

Four deaths that occurred as a result of the flooding have now been confirmed on Pine Ridge.

Pine Ridge tribal chair Julian Bear Runner as well as the state of South Dakota pleaded for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide help. “Rather than declaring emergencies that don’t exist, President Trump needs to pay attention to the ones that do,” said Oglala Tribal Chair Julian Bear Runner, in a statement referencing Trump’s declaration of a national emergency on the U.S. border with Mexico. “I call upon him to send us help before lives are further disrupted.”

But the U.S. government refused to declare a state of disaster, just as they had failed to help Pine Ridge after a destructive July 2018 hailstorm that brought tornado-like winds and hailstones the size of softballs, damaging about 550 houses

there.

The Oglala Lakota of Pine Ridge did not sit idly by awaiting help from an uncaring government. “Rez aid” — sometimes jokingly referred to as “Rez Cross” — was in high gear, with Native people and others working round the clock for weeks to deliver water, food and other desperately needed items on foot, on horseback, on farm equipment and any way they could get to some of the most heavily flooded areas.

Puerto Rico, New Orleans, Haiti and other places have also been devastated as a result of climate change, and the U.S. government has largely turned its face away from their suffering, too — the same U.S. government that has money to support Zionist repression of Palestinians and money to rebuild a Catholic church in France.

One effect of this has been to increase solidarity among the many impacted communities. For instance, during a national news appearance, San Juan’s mayor, Carmen Yulín Cruz, referenced the situation at Pine Ridge and FEMA’s failure to provide for communities of color.

On the front lines resisting pipelines

In the midst of the flooding crisis, Trump issued a presidential permit to allow the Keystone XL pipeline (“KXL”) to cross the Canadian border into the U.S. “Trump’s decision to ram KXL through while our families suffer feels like being kicked while we’re down,” Bear Runner said.

The Trump administration is doing its best to increase the impact of climate change, grabbing lands wholesale for exploitation and ramming through multiple pipeline projects. Vulnerable communities in the U.S. and worldwide are directly impacted by climate collapse. The massive use and extraction of fossil fuels directly link to the flooding, droughts and other extreme weather that are felt broadly.

Attorney Chase Iron Eyes, public relations director for the Oglala Sioux Tribe, said that “Trump’s insistence on circumventing court decisions designed to reign in oil pipeline development on, or near, Sioux tribal land is particularly egregious given our current suffering.” He continued, “Mr. Trump apparently has no respect for scientific or Indigenous perspectives on what is causing these super storms, and he has no respect for the rule of law.”

Indigenous people — at the front lines of the resistance to pipelines — are particularly targeted everywhere. In the U.S., corporations do not want to see a recurrence of the type of resistance that occurred at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline, where thousands joined to protect the water and more than 800 people were arrested, with the stiffest sentences imposed on Indigenous water protectors such as Red Fawn Fallis.

The energy corporations have directly colluded with police forces and private security firms as well as legislators and regulators. [According to In These Times](#), energy companies have sponsored bills in at least seven states to criminalize resistance to their corporate terrorism, and at least eleven more such bills have been introduced.

In South Dakota, while Oglala homelands were still underwater, Gov. Kristi Noem signed into law two bills designed to help the state government police what are expected to be massive, Indigenous-led demonstrations against KXL construction. One of the laws creates new civil penalties for “riot boosting,” which would apply not only to so-called “riot” participants but to anyone who “directs, advises, encourages, or solicits other persons participating in the riot to acts of force or violence.”

