

Southwest Workers Union

military toxics conference II encuentro contra toxicos militares II

“converging community struggles in the face of u.s. military contamination”
July 14-16, 2005
san antonio, texas

Report: Global Community Leaders Unite Against Military Toxics

Southwest Workers Union brought together community leaders from around the world to unite for clean, healthy communities and discuss the global legacy of U.S. military contamination. From Okinawa, Japan to Vieques, Puerto Rico from Philadelphia to Hawaii, 27 representatives participated in the second Military Toxics Conference in San Antonio, Texas from July 14-16, 2005. The intent was to create a space for dialogue between community leaders to share strategies and begin to brainstorm ways organizations can work together to build greater community power against military toxics.

San Antonio, Texas, a city situated near the U.S.-Mexico border, is home to 7 military installations. The conference came in the shadows of the BRAC (Base Realignment



and Closure) process that is posed to close several military installations nationwide, in a manner that fails to incorporate community participation nor to address the persistent question of toxics and health impacts. Leaders traveled from Okinawa, Alaska, Hawaii, South Korea, Nevada, Utah, the Philippines, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Philadelphia, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Memphis, Vieques, Rhode Island, Kentucky and Texas.



Background

The imperialistic and profit-driven agenda of the U.S. government has proliferated the presence of the U.S. military throughout the world. Location of military bases is often linked to the oppression and exploitation of conquered peoples for U.S. interests. For example, military installations line the

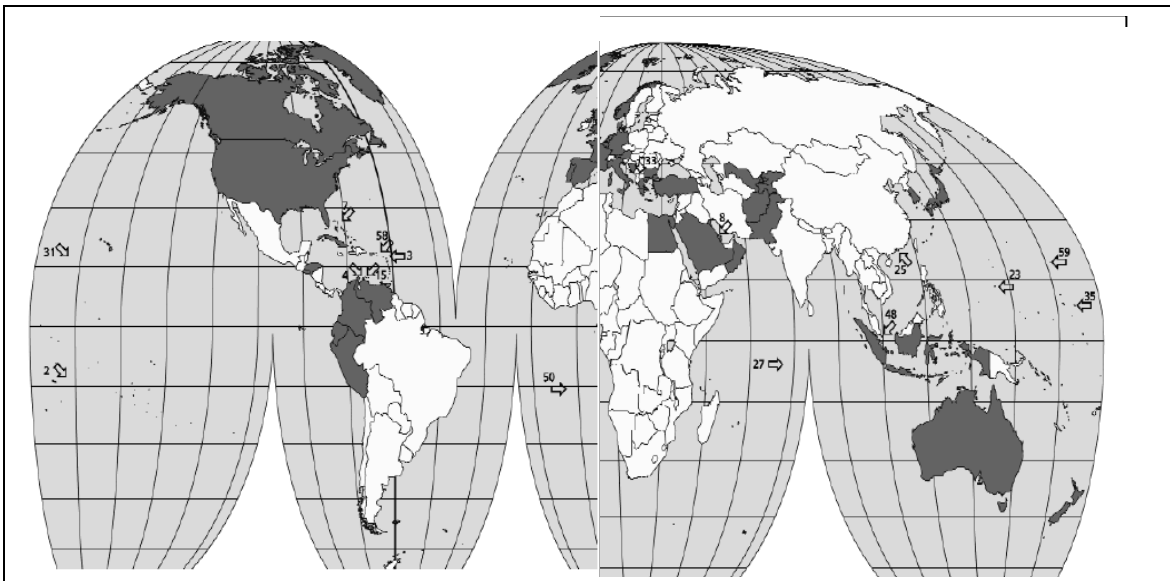


southwest and the Hawaiian islands, both victims of expansionistic wars. Similarly, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Philippines, Okinawa, Japan and Korea all saw bases imposed after wars. Thus, the mere existence of the bases is directly connected to oppression, loss of sovereignty and violence.

A new global legacy has been created – that of military toxics. The toxics of this military-industrial machine radiate out from the military bases that store and maintain materials to the testing sites to the victims of warfare. The Department of Defense is the biggest polluter in the nation and yet continues to demand even more unnecessary exemptions from environmental regulations and cleanup laws. From Hiroshima to Vieques to bases inside the U.S., the military is one of the largest sources of contamination globally. Atomic

weapons, Agent Orange and toxic materials have all carved a deadly legacy in communities throughout the world for generations to come.

Integral to the worldwide struggle for demilitarization, is the struggle against military toxics and for the decontamination of our communities. Even as the military abandons a site or a U.S. base closes, the toxics linger in the air, water, soil and people causing cancer, birth defects, asthma, muscle and bone diseases, etc. Most often, the true impact of these toxics is yet to be fully realized. Within the United States and in many places, this is also a question of environmental racism. Poor communities, Indigenous Communities and People of Color are most often victimized by military toxics.



Map 1: Shaded countries & territories represent location of US military Base.

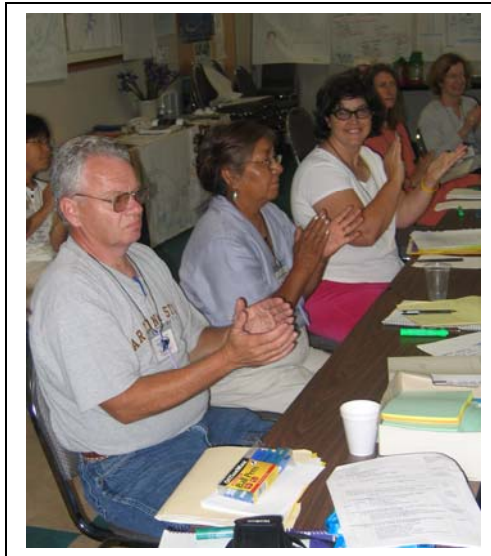
Source:
<http://www.monthlyreview.org/0302map1.pdf>

Since the Cold War, the U.S. government continues to close various bases in the country arguing that domestic bases lack necessity in the new global order. What communities face today is the privatization of military bases that creates a vast funnel for public resources into the development of more potent weapons of mass destruction. While the communities are still contaminated, corporations like Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Pratt Whitney reap benefits by engaging in the same polluting processes to maintain and refine the machinery of warfare and oppression.

In spite of this, everyday communities around the world are resisting the presence and contamination of the U.S. military. From education to civil disobedience, communities continue to demand justice and create change from the ground up.

Sharing Realities

A primary aim of the conference was to open a space to share community realities and experiences and begin to see commonalities among our struggles that



cross nation, race and gender boundaries. Participants, some traveling over 17 hours to arrive at the conference, dedicated time and energy to sharing, learning and working towards new possibilities. During an opening press conference and a later panel presentation for the community and youth, participants shared personal and community

impacts as well as battles for justice. From the loss of a daughter to the contamination of traditional foods, from the destruction of sacred sites to the daily impact of bombing on residents, participants educated each other on the first-hand consequences of military toxics that extend far beyond chemical names and geological analyses.

During the first day of the conference, participants each designed a piece of the 'Mural of Our Community Realities,' a quilt of pictures that visually reflects the reality each community is facing. This mural symbolically brought communities together despite the physical distance and language that may divide them and highlighted not only the sweeping legacy of military toxics but the commonalities among the struggles for life and survival.



Local Stories

Southwest Workers Union organized an environmental justice tour of San Antonio, highlighting the local community work. The Youth Organizing Training Institute (YOTI) of the Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice also joined the conference for the tour and evening events. The YOTI involved about 30 youth from grassroots organizations in the southwest US and northern Mexico. The tour first passed through South-Town, site of a major intersection of railroad tracks, Newell recycling, L&H meat rendering plant & a power station. Everyday thousands of tons of toxic waste pass through the backyards of this community on Union Pacific Tracks, whose negligence caused over 21 derailments in 2004 and unfortunately cost 5 lives. SWU organized the South-Town Organizing Project (STOP) to demand the safety of the residents and children, the reroute of Union Pacific outside the city and an end to the transport of toxins through communities.

The tour focused in the southwest part of the city, home of the former Kelly Air Force Base (now KellyUSA) whose toxic soup extends 5 miles into the community and covers an area of 12 square miles. The activities of the base over the last 80 years have left the community and former workers burdened with multiple serious illnesses that range from Lou Gehrig's disease to cancer to reproductive disorders



and birth defects. Closing in 2001 because of the BRAC, Kelly AFB received a superficial



makeover to become a privatized industrial park that performs the same work at the cost of billions of taxpayer dollars with lower wages and no union. Under the banner of Project ReGeneration, SWU-CEJA is striving to bring the community back to life through a proactive strategy that ensures the participation of affected residents in the decisions that impact their lives and families. The intent is to achieve a timely and complete environmental cleanup, to improve access to health care and education, to work to preserve the health of future generations and to develop a model for other communities facing base closures and military toxics. As part of this process, SWU-CEJA uses the symbol of the purple cross to visualize the human face to the Kelly contamination.

CEJA community leaders, Robert & Guadalupe Alvarado and their family hosted dinner the first night for the conference and the YOTI. The backyard was complete with welcomes signs, banana trees, tiki torches and a huge home-cooked dinner buffet. The participants raved about the excellent food and the wonderful hosting by their family. Thanks again for all the hard-work and dedication!



Global Resistance, Global Inspirations

During the panel presentation that took place inside KellyUSA, the participants, local community and youth had an opportunity to learn from the incredible movements taking place outside the United States, in Alaska and locally. Kaori Sunagawa of the Okinawa Environmental Network told of the canoe crews that spend every day in the ocean successfully disrupting the construction of a new U.S. base over the reefs. Originally an independent nation, Okinawa bounced between occupation by Japan and the U.S., eventually being ruled by Japan but dominated by the presence of U.S. military bases. Cynthia Martinez and Ismael Guadalupe of Vieques, Puerto Rico, shared the successful strategies of civil disobedience employed to force the navy to stop bombing and leave their island, as well as the continued movement for the health and cleanup of their community. In the Philippines, Myrla Baldonado showed the building of people's power with protests of tens of thousands of people to demand justice after the bases closed. There is no regulatory authority or mechanism to pressure the U.S. government to clean or even document contamination on foreign bases.

Vi Waghiyi of Alaska Community Action on Toxics spoke to the 'invasion' of Alaska by the defensive department during WWII and the Cold War, and the cultural and community health devastation as a result of their activities. She emphasized the importance of their native traditions



and the genocidal impacts of the contamination on the people. Ji-Seon Koh described the perpetual war scenario the people of South Korea face from the training sites and 101 bases of the U.S. military, concentrated ironically in the demilitarized zone of a divided nation. Sicknesses, loss of livelihood and death from stray bombs prompted local resistance that has won the closure of several bases and bombing ranges in Korea, but the land was returned polluted and destroyed. The inspirational words of Kenneth Bradshaw from South Memphis, urged the audience not to be deceived by the image of the Department of Defense. He emphasized that it is an entity designed to kill, at home and abroad, through warfare and contamination affecting generations to come.





Our Success Stories

The second day of the conference opened with a discussion about the demands that organizations are making and the successes communities have seen as a result of organizing efforts. This served to remind everyone of the positive steps that have been won in spite of the seemingly overwhelming size of the problem, recognize the power of people even in confronting the Department of Defense and realize the combined collective significance of these victories. Success included:

- The prevention of construction of new bases or toxic facilities
- Forcing the Department of Defense to stop bombing practices
- Successful use of media to spread community messages and demands
- Development of sustainable alternative programs, such as toxic-free community gardens
- Educating ourselves and the community and developing resources for other communities to use
- Obtaining money for cleanup and health studies
- Empowering communities through

the acquisition of air monitoring systems and community data collection.

Strategies for people's power

After reflecting and describing community strategies used to address issues of military toxics, cleanup, health and revitalization, the group created a wall of effective techniques to use. From the importance of base-building to civil disobedience to utilizing the knowledge of elders to having symbols in the movement, this broad outline reflected the diversity and multiplicity of ways to confront the issue.

This then led into a consensus workshop discussing the following question: How can our organizations work together effectively to enhance/help our local struggles and build community power against military toxics? Combining individual brainstorming, with participatory small group discussion and then relying on the collective wisdom of everyone in the room, the consensus outcomes (that answered the above question) were:

- Education, Information and Resource Sharing



- Taking and Participating in Coordinated Actions
- Develop Unified Strategies and Objectives
- Build Relationships through Respect and Trust
- Stay Connected
- Develop Media and Communication
- Creating Sustainable Communities



Process is important

SWU utilized a consensus-based participatory methodology, called the Technology of Participation. This process allowed everyone's voice to be heard and is based on the premise that the wisdom exists in the room. Many important and in-depth conversations occur in small group work that is then carried to the broader group. It allows everyone to put up their ideas and develop consensus based on the collection of knowledge from all the participants.

March for Community Lives

Following major downpours on Saturday morning, SWU-CEJA continued with the organized March for Community Lives in the Kelly community. The march occurred on the 4th anniversary of the closure of Kelly Air Force Base for the health and regeneration of the community. A ceremony opened the march by offering a

blessing and calling upon the four directions. The march was led by 4 generations of the Alvarado family with all marchers wearing T-shirts demanding healthy communities and the cleanup of military toxics. Marching through the community, the neighborhood filled with chants like "Vida Si, Cancer No" and "We want a cleanup not a cover-up."

Carrying purple crosses in remembrance of the victims of the Kelly AFB toxics, nearly 200 community residents together with the international presence of the conference participants completed the two mile march that rallied at the main entrance of Kelly USA. Local organizations participating included Fuerza Unida, San Antonio Cultural Arts, and the PEACE Initiative. Under a fighter jet, a broad range of leaders gave solidarity statements from a 10 year old girl to great-grandparents, from local community to a Hawaiian native. The convergence between the conference participants into the local march for health, cleanup and regeneration provided a powerful space to exchange stories, build power, inspire and educate the local and global leaders. This powerful event encapsulated the concept of connecting local resistance to global struggles.

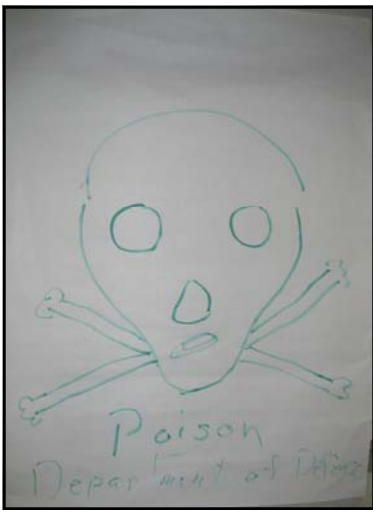
Sharing Culturass

The conference concluded with a relaxed social event at Café Revolucion and opportunity to share cultures and talents with the group. The National Association of Latino Arts and Culture joined in the event. Participants shared videos, songs, dances, jokes and stories.

Thanks to Environmental Support Center for their support of the Conference; to Vida Fuerte for his donation of the banner; and to Centro por la Justicia, Lupe, Isabel, Nick, & the Alvarados for their contribution of home-made cooking.



our community realities



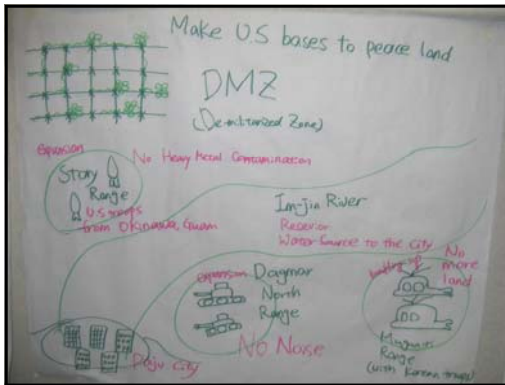
Kenneth, Memphis TN



Kaori, Okinawa Japan



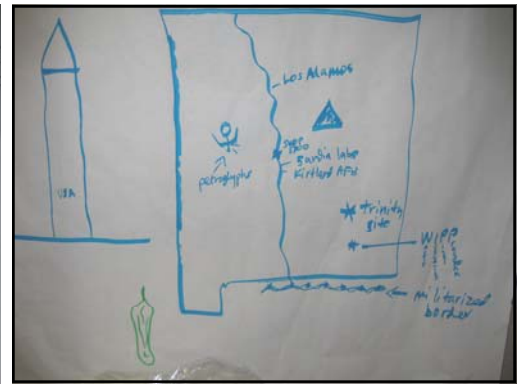
Linda, Big Island Hawaii



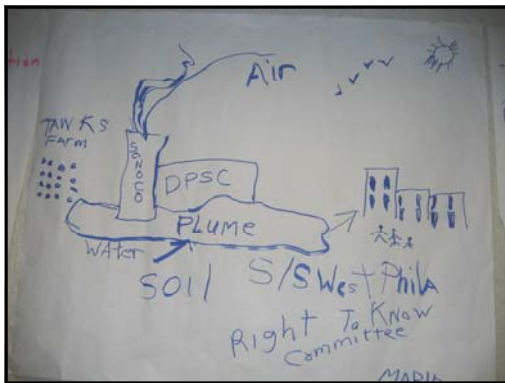
Ji-Seon, Korea



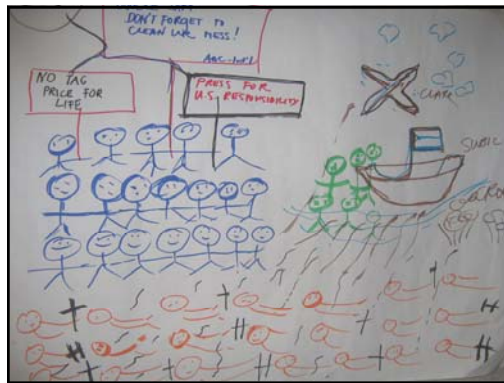
Ismael, Vieques PR



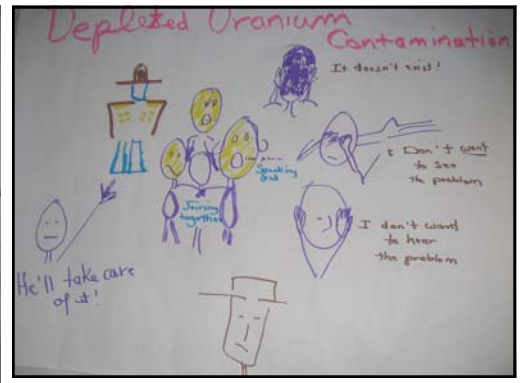
Karlos, New Mexico



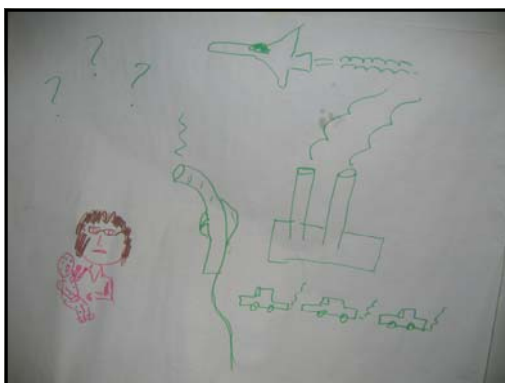
Mable, Philadelphia PA



Myrla, Philippines



Carol, Massachusetts

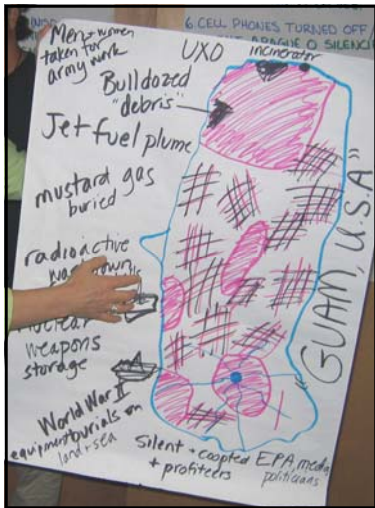


Terry, Tucson AZ



Laura, Merrimac WI

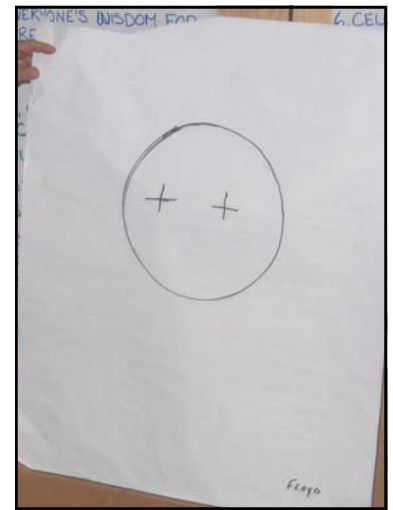
our community realities 2



Catherine, on Guam



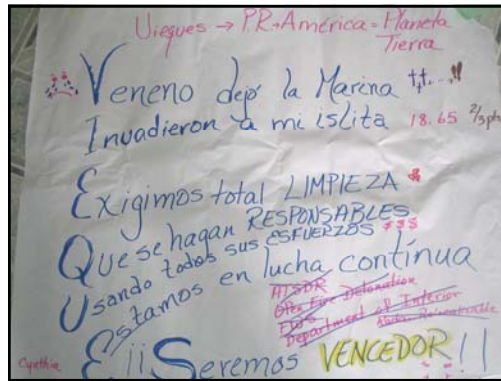
Margene, Skull Valley UT



Floyd, Fallon NV



Genaro, San Antonio TX



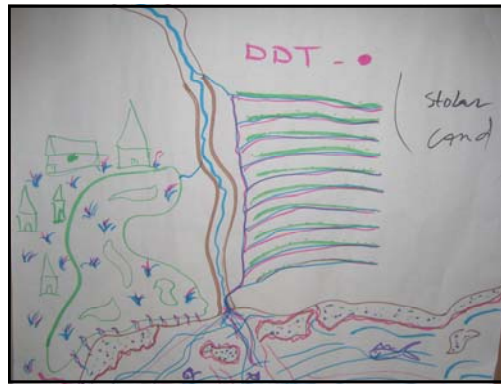
Cynthia, Vieques PR



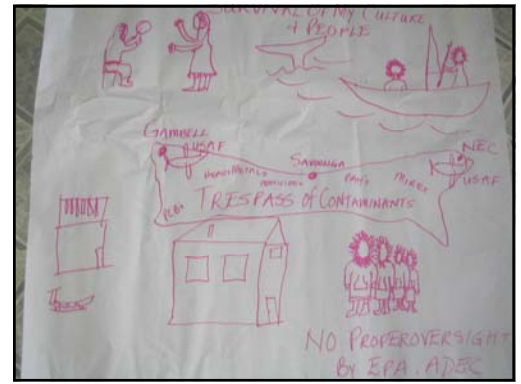
Donna, Merrimac WI



Sharyle, Bolinas CA



Palikapu, Big Island Hawaii



Vi, Alaska

Participants

Carol Dwyer, Grassroots Action for Peace, Concord Massachusetts
Catherine Lutz, Brown University, Providence Rhode Island
Chavel Lopez, Hondo Empowerment Committee, Hondo Texas
Cynthia Martinez, Comite Pro Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques, Vieques Puerto Rico
Donna Schmitz, Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger, Merrimac Wisconsin
Elizabeth Crowe, Chemical Weapons Working Group, Berea Kentucky
Floyd Sands, Families in Search of the Truth, Fallon Nevada
Genaro Lopez, Southwest Workers Union, San Antonio Texas
Guadalupe Alvarado, SWU-Committee for Environmental Justice Action, San Antonio TX
Ismael Guadalupe, Vieques Puerto Rico
Jill Johnston, Southwest Workers Union, San Antonio Texas
Ji-Seon Koh, Green Korea United, Seoul Korea
Jose Bravo, Just Transitions Alliance, San Diego Texas
Judy Cardenas, SWU-Committee for Environmental Justice Action, San Antonio Texas
Kaori Sunagawa, Okinawa Environmental Network, Okinawa Japan
Karlos Schmeider, SouthWest Organizing Project, Albuquerque New Mexico
Kenneth Bradshaw, Defense Depot of Memphis, TN – Concerned Citizens Committee,
Memphis Tennessee
Laura Olah, Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger, Merrimac Wisconsin
Lindafaye Kroll, Malu Aina, DMZ Hawaii, Keaau Hawaii
Mable Mallard, Right to Know Committee, Philadelphia Pennsylvania
Margene Bullcreek, Ohngo Gaudadeh Devia Awareness, Tooele Utah
Myrla Baldonado, Alliance for Base Clean-up, International, Quezon City, Philippines
Palikapu Dedman, Pele Defense Fund, Protect Kahoolawe Fund, Hilo Hawaii
Robert Alvarado, SWU-Committee for Environmental Justice Action, San Antonio Texas
Ruben Solis, Southwest Workers Union, San Antonio Texas
Terry Nordbrock, Families Against Cancer & Toxics, Sierra Vista Arizona
Sharyle Patton, Commonweal, Bolinas California
Vi Waghiyi, Alaska Community Action on Toxics, Anchorage Alaska