

The right way – and the wrong way – to celebrate Earth Day

Guest Columnist Sarah Stock | Posted: Thursday, April 23, 2015 9:48 am

Earth Day came into being in 1970, at the beginning of the modern day environmental movement.

The U.S. had just seen the largest oil spill of its day off the coast of Santa Barbara and anti-war protests were raging. The idea of Earth Day started as a nationwide teach-in, highlighting the importance of reducing pollution, promoting global peace and honoring the world that we live in. Now that we know about climate change, Earth Day becomes ever more important.

This week, in celebration of Earth Day, the Utah Division of Oil Gas and Mining (UDOGM) has decided to bestow "Earth Day Awards" upon some of our most notorious polluters, including Rio Tinto (Kennecott Copper Mine), Canyon Fuel Company (coal) and others. The Kennecott Copper strip mine is the largest industrial point source for pollution in the Salt Lake Valley. The Canyon Fuel Company owns one of Utah's highest producing coal mines, increasing Utah's carbon emissions. Why aren't organizations providing real solutions being acknowledged with Earth Day Awards?

Because of the environmental movement, we got the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act, but today both of those acts are being gutted. The onslaught of offshore oil production continues in Santa Barbara County. Companies have even begun fracking the sea floor near California's major fault lines. We are developing tar sands in Grand County. Similar stories abound in every country. Even with the rise of a massive environmental movement, global awareness of climate change, and real scientific evidence that we must change our trajectory to continue to thrive, the vested interests who control the money also continue to control our regulatory agencies. These "Earth Day Awards" are a smack in the face to all those before us who have fought for real environmental justice.

Enough is enough. As people who care about the future of humanity, we need to up our game. Rather than green-washing and heralding some minor achievements in reclamation, UDOGM should be looking



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at the true impacts that these industries have on the people, the water, and the earth. The state should be celebrating Earth Day by highlighting achievements in small-scale alternatives, conservation of energy, local food production, and education, not celebrating the legacy of toxic energy production and extraction.

I have hope for localized solutions; I see them everyday. However, in order to really succeed, we must organize to confront those in power and demand a chance to change.

It's not easy to imagine a world where we take our power back, but it's possible, and it's fun.

Come out for a local Earth Day Celebration this weekend. On Friday, April 24, at 6 p.m. at the Moab Arts and Recreation Center, there will be a panel discussion and community dinner. We will hear from tribal leaders, elders, and community organizers confronting dirty energy production in the Colorado River watershed. On Saturday, April 25, there will be an Earth Day Parade at 11 a.m. at the Moab Valley Multicultural Center. We will walk in order to honor the earth and to demand protection of the Colorado River watershed. The Colorado Plateau is ground zero for some of the most intensive extractive industries in the United States. Join us, celebrate, and build the community needed to weather this coming storm.