

The Year Ahead for California's Rural Counties

PublicCEO

John Viegas, RCRC Chair and Glenn County Supervisor

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Last month, I was sworn in as Chair of the Rural County Representatives of California, better known as RCRC. The core of RCRC's mission is to improve the ability of small, rural California county governments to provide services by reducing the burden of state and federal mandates, and promoting a greater understanding among policy makers about the unique challenges that face California's small population counties.

I am honored and humbled to have been selected by my fellow Board Members to lead the organization in 2016, which is shaping up to be another challenging year for California's rural counties. As an organization we will work to identify new ways to address ongoing, unresolved issues such as State Payment in Lieu of Taxes (State PILT), which heavily impacts California's rural counties. State PILT was established in 1949 to offset adverse impacts to county property tax revenues that result when the State acquires private property for wildlife management areas. Prior to 2015, the State had not made annual payments in more than a decade, resulting in arrearages of more than \$19 million to 36 California counties. RCRC plans to sponsor legislation to change recently-amended language that now makes these payments permissive as opposed to required, and will work to recoup the arrearages through the Budget process.

In addition to identifying new avenues to advocate for ongoing issues, much of the year will be spent on a handful of extremely important and timely issues of importance. First, the recently-enacted Medical Marijuana Regulatory Framework and its implementation in California's counties is already at the forefront of RCRC's priority list. In addition to potential legislative actions, State regulatory agencies are in the process of crafting rules and guidelines, and RCRC will work alongside local government partners to ensure that the regulations are clear, and that proper guidance and support is provided to counties.

California's forested counties are expecting their last Secure Rural Schools & Community Self-Determination Act (SRS) payment in a matter of weeks. Enacted in 2000, SRS provides funding for forested counties and school districts to replace revenue from dwindling forest receipts due to national decline in timber harvesting. When first enacted, SRS provided nearly \$60 million annually to California's forested counties, with half of the funding allocated to school districts and the other half for county roads. SRS initially expired in 2006 and has been reauthorized multiple times; however, each reauthorization has seen a reduction in the amount of funding for the program. In 2015, RCRC initiated a multi-pronged statewide advocacy and media campaign which included the adoption of 27 county resolutions urging Congress to

immediately reauthorize and provide long-term funding for the SRS program. This year, RCRC will continue to support efforts to secure long-term funding of the SRS program.

Third, severe risk of wildfire due to years of mismanagement of our state's National forests has been worsened by recent drought conditions in California. RCRC and its strategic partners and stakeholders will continue to advocate for policies, such as federal efforts to end "fire borrowing," that enable and enhance funding for forest management, fuels treatment, and watershed health projects in California's forests. Along the same vein, California is facing a severe bark beetle infestation due to the drought, causing tens of millions of trees to die across the state. RCRC and several of our member counties are at the forefront of the State's activities to address the issue, and maintain a seat on the Governor's Tree Mortality Task Force.

Fourth, the Legislature is anticipated to consider reforms to further implement criminal justice realignment of 2011, and the Governor recently amended a ballot initiative that would introduce various juvenile justice and adult sentencing reforms. RCRC will work with our criminal justice and county partners to ensure that the proposals considered by the Legislature provide a mix of resources to support local communities.

Last, but definitely not least, water will once again be a top agenda item as the Administration, State Agencies, and the Legislature move forward on multiple fronts. State regulatory agencies continue to develop regulations and guidelines for the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. The California Water Commission continues to develop the Water Storage Investment Program regulations, and the State Water Resources Control Board has before it a petition for a change in water right permit and license conditions for California WaterFix, with potential impacts to in-Delta and upstream water users.

There is a lot to be done, and my fellow Board Members and I have already hit the ground running. California's rural counties deserve a unified voice in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., and I look forward to working with our partners and associated stakeholders to continue to advance the policies important to rural California.

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