

Rural California is Getting Quick Finish of the Stick

Lockport Press
Foon Rhee

California politicians pay plenty of lip service to bridging the widening gap between the richer coast and poorer inland.

If they mean what they say and want to back up their words with action, the agenda of Rural County Representatives of California is a pretty good place to start.

The group advocates for 35 of California's 58 counties, home to nearly 10 percent of the population, 55 percent of the state's land area and 75 percent of the state's water. The group's directors are county supervisors who represent a huge swath of California north of the Bay area, plus much of the Central Valley.

Study after study has shown that the . The California Business Roundtable, which represents the state's biggest companies, warns that we have a "two-tier" economy.

But rural counties don't want an adversarial relationship with richer areas, says Paul Smith, the group's vice president for governmental affairs. "We want to be self-sufficient," he told me.

Helping rural counties help themselves makes all sorts of sense. And boosting rural California could calm the political fever to split the state – a dangerous distraction from actually solving our problems.

This week, the group is releasing a priority list for 2018. It includes several items to tackle the increasing threat from wildfires. Like many other groups, it is to fund fighting catastrophic wildfires just like other natural disasters, instead of forcing the U.S. Forest Service to borrow from its regular budget, taking money away from clearing brush and other fire prevention measures. Member counties include 80 percent of Forest Service land in the state.

Also, rural counties are urging the Legislature to help homeowners whose insurance coverage is being canceled or not renewed after last year's wildfires. The that claims from those fires hit a record \$11.8 billion in 2017, including \$10 billion from the October blazes in wine country. The group has several representatives on the governor's tree mortality task force, which is seeking to improve.

Smith says if large swaths of the Central Sierra burn, it would devastate those rural communities for decades.

Even now, many rural areas don't have major industries or big tax bases, and are often at the mercy of the federal and state governments for money. So Smith's group is

pushing this year to change application rules so more of its member counties can apply for tens of millions in state grants for disadvantaged communities and for economic development grants from the federal farm bill.

Rural County Representatives also hopes to benefit from President Donald Trump's infrastructure plan, especially to. High-speed internet is essential for economic development, education, health care – to stay competitive in the 21st century, Smith says.

"It's a must-have," he says.

The group also is keeping close watch on any new initiatives out of the state Capitol on affordable housing to make sure rural counties' needs are met.

And it's monitoring the rollout of legal recreational marijuana, with a focus on cultivation. For instance, the group shares in state rules will lead to large-scale farms by allowing companies to get an unlimited number of small cultivation licenses. It is calling for a delay in licenses until these concerns are worked out.

Safe to say, rural counties are dealing with a lot of issues. I was disappointed that Gov. Jerry Brown didn't say more in his State of the State speech about rural concerns, or the divide between coast and inland. Making some progress and laying the foundation for the next governor would be a worthy legacy.

With so many more legislators, at the state Capitol. It would be good for all of California to listen to rural representatives, too.

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