

The Year Ahead for California's Rural Counties

Public CEO
Rex Bohn
February 6, 2018

I was recently 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 quality of life in California's rural counties. To accomplish this, RCRC strives to promote a greater understanding among policymakers about the unique challenges that face California's small population counties, and advocates that they consider these challenges when developing policy and regulations.

I am honored to have been selected by my fellow RCRC Board Members to lead the organization in 2018, 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 the ongoing, unresolved issues such as disadvantaged communities and forestry management/wildfire funding, while also developing and advocating for legislative proposals on a handful of proactive opportunities, including the Federal Farm Bill, housing, insurance coverage in high-risk wildfire areas, and the continued implementation of the cannabis regulatory scheme, to name a few.

The following is a brief synopsis of the issues, legislative proposals and strategic efforts RCRC and its local government partners will be addressing this legislative session:

Disadvantaged Communities

Under current definitions, 27 of California's rural counties are unfairly excluded and disqualified from accessing funding specifically targeted for Disadvantaged Communities. RCRC has developed alternate Disadvantaged Communities definitions that are more equitable to California's underserved communities. We will continue our advocacy efforts to urge this language be included in legislative and regulatory proposals.

2018 Farm Bill

Approximately every five years, Congress establishes agricultural, food and rural policy in an omnibus Farm Bill. Many of the provisions in the current Farm Bill are set to expire later in the year and Congress has begun the reauthorization process. RCRC will continue to advocate for provisions in the Farm Bill that revise the definition of “rural” (the current definitions have the effect of excluding many rural California counties from being eligible for a variety of programs), and a number of aspects in the Rural Development title, which is aimed to promote economic activity in rural areas of the country.

Federal Forest Reform/Wildfire Funding

The Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFFA) seeks to end the practice of “fire borrowing” by treating catastrophic wildfires like other natural disasters. Under the WDFFA, the actual disaster response for catastrophe-level wildfire events would be issued from a different funding source than the bottom line United States Forest Service budget from which prevention and forest management projects are also funded. California’s forests, and other forests across the western United States are at serious risk of large, high-severity wildfires that threaten lives, communities, water resources, wildlife habitat and recreation. Working independently, and with our California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA) partners, RCRC will continue to advocate for a common-sense approach toward reducing the effects and severity of wildfires.

Insurance Coverage – High Wildfire Risk Areas

An increasing number of rural homeowners are being denied insurance coverage following devastating wildfires that have occurred over the past five years. RCRC is working to address this issue head-on, both independently, and through our seat on the Governor’s Tree Mortality Task Force. There are a number of fire insurance-related measures already being considered in the Legislature that RCRC is working to enact into law.

Cannabis Regulatory Scheme

With the enactment of the Medical Cannabis Regulation and Safety Act and the Adult Use of Marijuana Act (Proposition 64), there are now a large number of licensed industry actors participating in the regulated commercial cannabis market. In order to participate in this market, cities and counties must sanction each cannabis activity. Many rural counties are sanctioning cannabis activities as well as collecting local taxes that accompany this activity. As one of the primary constructors of the cannabis regulatory scheme (particularly with respect to county roles), RCRC will continue to work with the state licensing agencies to ensure county priorities are maintained in the commercial cannabis market, including in rural counties where a great deal of cultivation exists.

Housing

In the year ahead we anticipate the Legislature will continue to consider various policy options to address the state's housing shortage and the housing affordability gap. Recent reports have found that more than 50 percent of California households cannot afford the cost of housing. RCRC will be at the forefront of this issue, once again working with our local government partners to preserve local control while ensuring that rural communities have the support they need to expand development of affordable housing units.

Infrastructure Development – Broadband Deployment

RCRC and its partners are working to create innovative funding mechanisms and programs to assist rural communities with development, operation and maintenance of water, wastewater, storm drain and collection systems. Without safe and reliable drinking and wastewater facilities, these communities struggle to compete with more populated regions in California, impacting the ability for these rural communities to retain and attract citizens, and stunting economic growth opportunities.

In addition, access to affordable and reliable high-speed broadband deployment in rural California is one of the most critical missing infrastructure components, and often precludes unserved and underserved communities from competing in the 21st Century

economy. RCRC will continue its efforts to bridge the digital divide, and I am excited about moving the needle on this most critical issue this year.

In addition to the legislative and regulatory advocacy efforts that lie ahead, we'll continue moving forward with two of our community give-back initiatives. 2018 will see the final phase of the roll-out of the Prevention Organized to Educate Children on Trafficking (PROTECT) program, an educational curriculum designed to reduce the vulnerability of the state's children to human trafficking. Funded by RCRC and affiliate National Homebuyers Fund, Inc. (NHF), PROTECT uses a three-pronged approach to fight human trafficking by providing educational curriculum modules for school-aged children in grades 5, 7, 9 and 11, and training for educators and professionals. Secondly, more than 1,100 foster youth and former foster youth in RCRC's 35 member counties will receive laptop computers through RCRC and NHF's partnership with iFoster and their 1 Laptop Program. We're excited about how these two efforts will change the lives of California's rural youth.

There is much to be done to safeguard the rural way of life in California. The RCRC Board of Directors and I look forward to working with our partners and associated stakeholders to continue to advance the policies important to rural communities throughout the Golden State.

<http://www.publicceo.com/2018/02/the-year-ahead-for-californias-rural-counties-3/>