

Rex Bohn Lays Out Priorities For Rural Counties as Coalition Chairman

Eureka Times-Standard

Will Houston

February 12, 2018

Now heading California's largest rural county organization, 1st District Humboldt County Supervisor Rex Bohn identified his priorities for the 35 counties he represents in the 2018 legislative session.

Sworn in as the Rural County Representatives of California chairman earlier this year, Bohn said Monday his priorities range from the state's housing shortage to cannabis taxation to an overhaul on federal funding for wildfire prevention.

"When over 25 percent of the population lives in one county," Bohn said Monday, referring to Los Angeles County, "the rural counties have to join together to have our voices heard. RCRC has been able to do that and make it the strongest voice in Sacramento for rural counties."

California Center for Rural Policy Executive Director Connie Stewart described Bohn's priorities as "ambitious" but "right on the mark."

"Rural counties would be definitely better off if he can accomplish all of that," Stewart said Monday.

At the federal level, Bohn said he plans to travel to Washington, D.C., in early March to lobby for infrastructure funding, the upcoming Farm Bill reauthorization, a wildfire suppression funding overhaul, cannabis banking and other issues.

Bohn said Monday he wants to see an end to "fire borrowing" where agencies like the U.S. Forest Service draws money from its other accounts when it goes over budget for fire suppression as has occurred in recent years.

The U.S. Forest Service stated it had its most expensive fire season in 2017 with costs exceeding \$2.4 billion, or close to 60 percent of its budget.

The service states it expects more than two-thirds of its total budget to be used for fire suppression by 2021.

Bohn said the federal government needs to begin treating wildfire suppression like other natural disasters, thereby allowing the Forest Service and other agencies to dedicate more funding toward preventing wildfires. Bohn said this is especially important given

that the U.S. Forest Service [reported California had a record number of trees die in 2017.](#)

Bohn said will advocate for the passage of the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2017, which was introduced to Congress last year. The bill would continue to fund fire suppression, but would allow the agency to apply for federal disaster funds should they go over their fire suppression budget.

“Once we get the money in place to manage our forests and the wherewithal to do it, we can stop these devastating forest fires,” Bohn said.

Another federal priority, Bohn said, is to ensure the agricultural industries in rural counties and Humboldt County are protected as Congress goes through the reauthorization process of the Farm Bill this year.

Stewart said the decisions made about the Farm Bill will be critical because the bill focuses on everything from economic development, to water conservation, housing, broadband, food assistance and rural energy infrastructure.

Stewart said California has often received the short end of the stick because it is not thought of as a rural state.

“That is the game for rural communities,” Stewart said describing the importance of the bill. “It’s critical that California have a strong voice.”

Bohn said he also wants to speak out on the impacts of the state’s prison realignment and criminal justice reform efforts on rural areas. Bohn said these changes have made it easier for heroin and methamphetamine dealers to “peddle their wares” in rural areas.

To address this, Bohn said he will be advocating for longer prison sentences for narcotics dealers. Certain felony drug possession charges were reduced to misdemeanors after state voters passed Proposition 47. Any changes will require voter approval.

With the state’s adult-use cannabis market working through its inaugural year, Bohn said that the organization will continue to advocate for local control in the state market. One aspect Bohn said he would like to focus on is taxation especially if prices begin to drop as some economists expect.

“Some counties have already changed their taxing efforts ... to be more reasonable to allow the farmers to come into compliance and adjust to the changing market,” Bohn said. “This is going to be an ever-changing market as we try to build land use [rules] around a brand new agricultural project.”

Bohn said he thinks Humboldt County’s cannabis cultivation tax rate — which ranges from \$1 to \$3 per square foot of permitted cultivation area — is fair considering what

other counties are charging. But he said there is room to look into [potential changes to how the tax is applied given some of the negative feedback from cultivators](#).

“I think it’s a discussion that probably should be had,” Bohn said.

Bohn said he is also open to discussing the one-acre cultivation cap issue.

The cap controversy resulted in the state’s largest cannabis grower’s organization, the California Grower’s Association, suing the state in late January. The association is arguing that the state is [violating its own cannabis laws by not capping cannabis farm sizes at one acre per person](#) for the first five years of the market. The state and others have argued that the laws never required such a cap.

“Getting a proper definition and ideas of what’s going on down the road is a big part of this,” Bohn said about the topic Monday.

Bohn outlined other priorities in a guest commentary [for the online publication PublicCEO this month](#), which includes increasing the fire insurance coverage; redefining the state’s definition of “disadvantaged communities” in order to allow more underserved communities access to state funding; housing development and affordability and broadband and infrastructure needs.

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