

Letters to the editor: May 25, 2017

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Rural disadvantaged communities continue to be ignored

Editor:

We've entered a new legislative session, and have welcomed many new legislators to Sacramento. Many of these leaders come with a desire to address the very real needs of some of our poorest, most impoverished citizens. Unfortunately, in their zeal, one key group is often overlooked — California's rural, disadvantaged communities.

As various proposals make their way through the legislative process, and regulations are crafted, it is crucial that the initial legislative intent of the author(s) is carried through, and that the purpose of the legislation is appropriately addressed in final laws and regulations. One area where we consistently experience this disconnect between legislative intent and execution is with the use of the California Communities Environmental Health Screening Tool (CalEnviroScreen) in identifying disadvantaged communities.

CalEnviroScreen was designed by the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) to serve as a tool for identifying California's most disadvantaged communities when prioritizing time, resources, and programs in those portions of the state that are most in need of assistance. However, the tool has long been criticized by disparate groups with widespread interests for its flaws in methodology. And while an update (CalEnviroScreen 3.0) was released late last year, the issue at hand remains unaddressed — and perhaps, worse. The latest version of the CalEnviroScreen tool continues to ignore California's most disadvantaged communities, both rural and urban.

In total, 30 of California's 58 counties do not have a single census tract identified in the top 25 percent scores of CalEnviroScreen — the methodology now used to consider applicants for Cap-and-Trade funding for disadvantaged communities. The use of CalEnviroScreen as a screening tool for grant solicitations and awards completely excludes these counties and the cities within from this funding source, many of those home to some of the most socioeconomically depressed communities in the state.

The Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC) focuses its advocacy efforts on providing a voice for California's rural counties and the communities within them at the state-level, as the rural perspective is often overlooked or ignored when policy and regulations are developed. Twenty-seven of RCRC's 35 member counties do not have a single census tract identified in the top 25 percent of CalEnviroScreen, which prohibits these counties from accessing funds specifically identified for disadvantaged communities. In fact, Tehama County actually lost the only tract it had following the

transition to version 3.0 of the tool (including portions of Corning and Red Bluff), leaving the county completely out of consideration for funding when the state applies CalEnviroScreen to identify disadvantaged communities.

The increasing use of CalEnviroScreen scores by State agencies to determine eligibility for certain grant set-asides and other preferential treatment in grant programs is concerning, particularly since Senate Bill 535 (De León), the bill requiring 25 percent of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) monies be spent to benefit disadvantaged communities, specifies that programs may consider either environmental or socioeconomic factors. The tool's methodology of combining the two unfairly weighs factors that ultimately exclude some of the state's poorest communities from consideration.

While the issue is receiving more attention than it has in the past, no action has been taken to consider the impacts this tool has upon rural California communities. It is wholly inappropriate that a statewide tool or methodology ignore more than 50 percent of California's counties. It's time the Legislature address this issue, and direct CalEPA to review the methodology used to develop CalEnviroScreen, and update it in an appropriate, balanced manner for the benefit of all California communities.

— *Supervisor Bob Williams, Corning*

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