

Rural Counties Need Help

Hollister Free Lance

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There is much to be done to safeguard the rural way of life in California.

California needs to identify new ways to address ongoing, unresolved issues faced by disadvantaged communities, and inadequate forestry management/wildfire funding, while also developing and advocating for legislative proposals on a handful of proactive opportunities, including the U.S. Farm Bill, housing, insurance coverage in high-risk wildfire areas, and the continued implementation of an effective cannabis regulatory scheme.

Under current definitions, 27 of California's rural counties are unfairly excluded and disqualified from accessing funding specifically targeted for disadvantaged communities. Rural County Representatives of California has developed alternate Disadvantaged Communities definitions that are more equitable to California's underserved communities.

A new farm bill needs to 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 designed to promote economic activity in rural areas of the country.

The proposed Wildfire Disaster Funding Act (WDFDA) seeks to end the practice of "fire borrowing" by treating catastrophic wildfires like other natural disasters. Under the WDFDA, the actual disaster response for catastrophic wildfire events would be issued from a different funding source than the U.S. Forest Service. California's forests and others across the western United States are at serious risk of large, high-severity wildfires that threaten lives, communities, water resources, wildlife habitat and

recreation. We need a commonsense approach to reducing the effects and severity of wildfires.

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. State licensing agencies need to ensure that county priorities are maintained in the commercial cannabis market, including in rural counties where a great deal of cultivation exists.

Rural County Representatives of California, of which San Benito County is a member, is 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 of 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.

This year will see the final phase of the rollout 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-age 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 35 counties will receive laptop computers through RCRC and NHF's partnership with iFoster and their 1 Laptop Program.

State policymakers need to understand the unique challenges that face California's small-population counties, and consider these challenges when developing policy and regulations.

Humboldt County Supervisor Rex Bohn is chairman of Rural County Representatives of California.

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