

Updated Tool Continues to Ignore California's Most Disadvantaged Communities

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The California Communities Environmental Health Screening Tool, more commonly known as 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 on 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.

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

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.

Some of California's most socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, both rural and urban, do not qualify for earmarked funding when the CalEnviroScreen tool is applied. In addition, despite wildfire emissions accounting for more than half of California's annual black carbon emissions, rural communities affected by the air quality impacts of wildfires are ineligible for disadvantaged communities funding from the GGRF because the tool doesn't consider episodic emissions events like wildfires. As an example, the communities impacted by the devastating fires in Lake County over the past two years remain ineligible for funds specifically dedicated to disadvantaged communities associated with carbon emissions, despite the fact that Lake County remains one of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged counties in the state.

And while an update (CalEnviroScreen 3.0) was released last month, the issue at hand remains unaddressed. The latest version of the CalEnviroScreen tool continues to ignore California's most disadvantaged communities, both rural and urban. The language in SB 535 includes a mechanism for identifying communities impacted by certain environmentally-related factors in order to allow them to compete for state

funding, in addition to economically distressed areas. However, the methodology developed is not appropriate for use in Cap-and-Trade auction proceeds or many other funding opportunities.

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.

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