



RURAL COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES
OF CALIFORNIA

December 30, 2019

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor, State of California
State Capitol, First Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: California's Rural Counties' 2020-21 State Budget Priorities

Dear Governor Newsom:

On behalf of the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), I am writing to respectfully request your Administration and the Legislature review the outlined top priorities for California's rural counties as you begin to craft the 2020-21 State Budget. The projected \$7 billion surplus for the 2020-21 State Budget could provide the resources needed to address many issues of importance to RCRC member counties.

RCRC is an association of thirty-seven rural California counties, and the RCRC Board of Directors is comprised of elected supervisors from those member counties. While RCRC advocates across a multitude of issue areas, the following is an outline of specific priorities, in no particular order, as they relate to California's rural counties' needs.

Forest Health and Wildfire Mitigation Funding

RCRC appreciates the Administration's commitment to expediting forest health projects according to the state Forest Carbon Plan and the Strategic Fire Plan. We believe the projects currently underway and in the planning stages are vital to reach the goal of restoring California's forests and wildlands to a condition that is more prepared for the new normal of climate change and wildfire. Senate Bill 901 (Chapter 626, 2018) included important, robust actions to improve the health and resilience of California's forested and wildlands to help minimize and prevent future catastrophic wildfire events. RCRC strongly recommends the continued dedication of SB 901 monies to forest health, restoration, and fuels treatment programs as outlined in the original legislation. Those funds must be allocated so California can continue to restore its forests to a natural, more resilient, fire-resistant condition.

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Williamson Act

The Williamson Act, also known as the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, authorizes cities and counties to enter into agricultural land preservation contracts with landowners who agree to restrict the use of their land in exchange for lower assessed valuations for property tax purposes.

State subventions directed to counties to help offset the loss of property taxes associated with Williamson Act have not been paid to counties since 2009. Without these payments, many counties have struggled to fully fund public services. RCRC continues to advocate for funding of payments to counties, and urges the Legislature and the Administration to recommit to the program. RCRC requests \$45 million in FY 2020-21 to eligible counties for the Williamson Act.

Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS)

Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) events have had a profound impact on local governments and residents throughout California, particularly in RCRC member counties. RCRC has been involved with several California Public Utilities Commission's proceedings to help ensure minimum impact on our members and their residents in the future. RCRC has also been actively engaged during the 2019 Legislative Session on de-energization bills, and supported recently-enacted measures that will help improve community resilience to PSPS events. While RCRC appreciated the recent allocation of \$26 million to counties to offset some local PSPS costs, more funding is needed to ensure that critical facilities and infrastructure remain operational during PSPS events. As RCRC continues to advocate for efforts that reduce the adverse impacts associated with PSPS events, we respectfully request \$150 million to the State's rural counties to increase resiliency of local critical facilities and infrastructure and mitigate the strain on local governments and California residents.

Fairs

State District Agricultural Association fairgrounds are utilized throughout the year for community events. Increasingly, these facilities are utilized by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and others as an evacuation centers, public safety command centers during catastrophic events, cooling centers during heatwaves, and similar multi-purpose benefits. As such, RCRC requests \$100 million to the Department of Food and Agriculture to make capital improvements, including broadband deployment, to these critical state-owned assets.

Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA)

In September 2014, Governor Brown signed a package of measures collectively referred to as Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), creating a framework for local agencies to develop Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs) tailored to the needs of the basins/sub-basins in their region. To implement their obligations under SGMA, local agencies, including many rural counties, formed

Groundwater Sustainability Agencies and are focused on developing GSPs to reach “sustainability” of the underlying basins within 20 years. For those basins/sub-basins designated as critically over-drafted, the GSPs are due to the Department of Water Resources by January 31, 2020; for basins designated as high- or medium-priority, basin plans are due on January 31, 2022. RCRC requests \$100 million to assist counties in implementing their SGMA obligations.

Solid Waste

Counties are the cornerstone for achieving ambitious solid waste targets. RCRC continues to advocate for regulatory relief from the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery's new organic waste regulations which seek to achieve the Short-Lived Climate Pollutant reduction goals set forth by Senate Bill 1383 (Chapter 395, 2017) through a mandate to divert 75 percent of organic waste from landfill disposal by 2025. In addition to regulatory relief, RCRC requests \$100 million annually to assist counties in implementing the new organic waste regulations. RCRC also request another \$100 million annually for solid waste recycling programs to address the decline in offshore markets, improve the quality of recycled materials, and increase in-state infrastructure necessary to achieve and maintain these recycling goals.

Community Wildfire Resiliency

RCRC requests \$100 million ongoing for local governments, fire safe councils, and resource conservation districts to establish local home hardening and defensible space assistance programs to help low-income residents in high- and very-high fire hazard severity zones safeguard their homes against wildfire. Additionally, RCRC is requesting \$16.2 million to local governments over the next five years to assist those small communities in very-high fire severity zones to incorporate fire safe development planning and similarly update general plans. Many rural communities contain large populations of elderly and disabled on fixed incomes, and have large areas of socio-economically disadvantaged residents. These areas of the state need increased attention to wildfire risk mitigation, including fire risk reduction development planning and establishment of defensible space programs that help residents maintain their defensible space requirements.

Watershed Resilience Portfolio

The Water Resilience Portfolio initiative creates an opportunity for California to reimagine how we might best steward the infrastructure investments already made, even as we operationalize them for today's ecosystem and economic needs. A healthy watershed leads to a healthy water supply. Nearly 75 percent of California's available water originates in the northern one-third of the state, while more than 70 percent of the demand occurs in the southern two-thirds of the state. RCRC recognizes the importance of investing in water infrastructure, namely the integration of California's surface water supply and groundwater and look forward to the release of the Water

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Resilience Portfolio. Absent additional insight into the particulars, RCRC requests \$75 million to assist counties in improving regional water resiliency within the watersheds.

Rural Water Infrastructure

RCRC supports significant new state and federal investment in our statewide infrastructure to help increase regional self-sufficiency for all regions of the State. RCRC supports the development of additional proposed surface storage projects if they are determined to be both feasible and economical. RCRC supports the “beneficiary pays” principle, meaning that beneficiaries who directly benefit from a specific project or program should pay for their proportional share of the costs of the project or program.

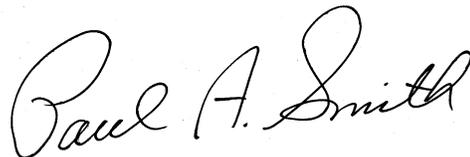
As such, RCRC requests \$150 million to fund regional integrated water resource initiatives to improve rural water infrastructure, rehabilitate needed recharge facilities and improve self-sufficiency.

University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension

RCRC supports state funding for the University of California to support research in agriculture and to improve the productivity and competitiveness of California's agricultural endeavors. It should be noted that in addition to agricultural programs, the University of California's Cooperative Extension program helps support a number of vital programs to California's rural communities. Unfortunately, the Cooperative Extension program is underfunded. As such, RCRC requests \$95 million – an amount that would increase funding to the state's agriculture and natural resources extension.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at psmith@rcrcnet.org or (916) 447-4806.

Sincerely,



PAUL A. SMITH
Vice President Governmental Affairs