



The 2021 RURAL RECAP

*A report from the Rural
County Representatives of
California Government
Affairs team*





Patrick Blacklock
RCRC President and CEO

2021

has been a year of transition and new beginnings.

In April, RCRC welcomed me as the President and CEO and we moved quickly to build upon RCRC's history of serving rural counties by identifying future opportunities through a collaborative strategic planning process. This effort concluded in December, when the Board of Directors adopted the 2022-2025 RCRC Strategic Plan.

As part of the Strategic Plan, the Board adopted a new vision statement: RCRC is the premier advocate and innovative service provider for rural communities in California. This statement recognizes that RCRC not only serves as the voice of rural counties with our state and federal advocacy efforts but also increasingly provides creative service solutions for rural communities. And, the 2021 year provided no shortage of opportunities to demonstrate this vision under the leadership of RCRC Chair, Mono County Supervisor Stacy Corless.

In January, RCRC announced the provision of \$50,000 to charities in Merced County which, according to tradition would have received the proceeds from RCRC's annual dinner auction in 2020, had coronavirus not canceled the event.

In the area of broadband, RCRC saw a need to assist with last-mile implementation and the Board of Directors, at the August meeting, approved the formation of a new joint powers authority, Golden State Connect Authority (GSCA), which aims to reduce the digital divide and improve quality by increasing access to reliable, affordable high-speed broadband for all rural Californians.



In September, RCRC formed a Wildfire and Forest Stewardship Ad Hoc Committee to assess the political and practical actions in which RCRC and its member counties can engage in order to improve stewardship of California's forested lands; aid residents in RCRC member counties in community and individual wildfire hardening activities; and help prevent future wildfires on federal, state and privately managed lands.

RCRC's Government Affairs team worked tirelessly during the 2021 year to address the needs of California's rural counties in the legislature. California's record-setting wildfire season and internet connectivity issues exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, helped bring the necessary attention to the issues of wildfire resiliency and broadband. As a result of the team's outstanding work and steadfast commitment over many years, California took an important step in the right direction and made significant financial investments in both of these key areas.

While plans for in person gathering were thwarted the prior year, 2021 brought the opportunity to return to some of RCRC's valued traditions. In June, RCRC held the Board meeting in the County of the Chair, where Supervisors had the opportunity to explore and experience beautiful Mono County. And, in September, RCRC's Annual Meeting was held in Monterey County. Thanks to the incredible generosity of county leaders and our incredible sponsors, our Annual Dinner Auction raised over \$56,000 for Mono County charities. To close out the year, more than a year after in-person events were first cancelled, RCRC was finally able to hold a board meeting in Merced County, hosted by Immediate Past Chair, Daron McDaniel. I am honored to serve as the RCRC President and CEO and am thankful for the incredibly talented staff team who along with our dedicated Board of Directors make these successes for our rural communities possible.

RCRC 2021 Rural Leadership Awards



Cecilia Aguiar-Curry

Member of the California State Assembly

Assembly Member Aguiar-Curry (D-Winters, AD-4) has strived during her time in the Legislature to bring increased internet connectivity to her rural Assembly district. This year, her Assembly Bill 14 (Chapter 658, Statutes of 2021) was signed by Governor Newsom, extending the California Advanced Services Fund program which helps subsidize last mile infrastructure construction in unserved and underserved areas of the state. Additionally, as Chair of the Assembly Committee on Local Government, Assembly Member Aguiar-Curry hears measures related to land use, and regularly leads discussions in committee about the importance of local control.

› Inside the 2021 Rural Recap



Martha Guzman Aceves

Commissioner of the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC)

Since being appointed to the CPUC in 2016, Commissioner Guzman Aceves has worked on broadband and utility access and affordability as well as clean energy programs for disadvantaged communities. Commissioner Guzman Aceves also represents the CPUC on the California Broadband Council. Her leadership on broadband access issues before the CPUC has made numerous infrastructure funding measures possible this year, including the enactment of Senate Bill 156 (Chapter 112, Statutes of 2021) which provides for a Loan Loss Reserve fund for local governments to utilize for the construction of broadband infrastructure.

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RCRC engaged in a variety of issues in 2021. Read about a few of the noteworthy issues of the year.

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RCRC Counties

View the map of member counties, a listing of the Board of Directors, and a listing of RCRC staff advocacy areas.

understanding of, and leadership in, rural issues and the unique challenges that rural communities face.

2021 HOT ISSUES

Wildfire Prevention and Forest Resilience

The year 2021 resulted in California's most substantial investment in forest resilience and public lands management efforts to date, with an unprecedented \$2.9 billion in dedicated state funding provided in the budget via the Early Action Wildfire Package, Senate Bill 155 and Senate Bill 170. These allocations are a good start, but nearly half of the funding is one-time money. Large annual investments are needed for the foreseeable future. RCRC has long understood that maintaining forest health and fire safety requires a multi-pronged approach. These state investments must come with the willingness to take a variety of actions, including: easing implementation of programs and policies that facilitate community fire resilience programs; increasing the pace and scale of forest management; restoring our forested watersheds; expanding infrastructure to manage woody byproducts; and helping low-income residents retrofit their homes for fire safety. RCRC supported several measures to address the state's progress on meeting its wildfire mitigation and forest resilience goals, including the RCRC-sponsored AB 1431 (Frazier).

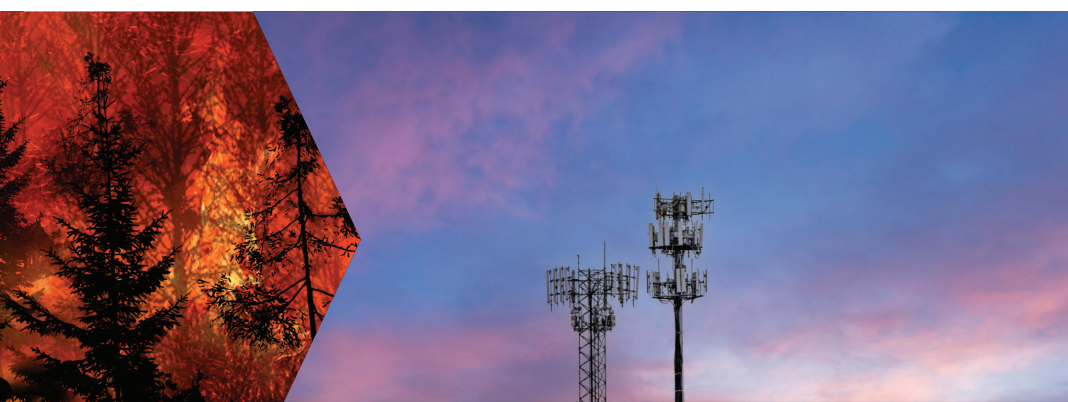
RCRC also continues to advocate for full funding of the Federal Payments-in-Lieu-of-Taxes (PILT) and Secure Rural Schools (SRS) programs, which are critical to the survival and economic recovery of rural counties that contain significant federal land.



The Dixie Fire of 2021

is now the 2nd largest wildfire in history

destroying more than 1,300 structures while resulting in the evacuation of numerous communities throughout Butte, Lassen, Plumas and Tehama Counties and the devastation of the entire community of Greenville in Plumas County.



Broadband

In 2021, RCRC continued to make great strides in establishing rural broadband deployment as a state priority, and in delivering tangible improvements to RCRC member counties.

RCRC strongly supported Senate Bill 156, which was enacted in July, and provides an historic \$6 billion investment to help close the Digital Divide. Additionally, RCRC was heavily involved in the passage of SB 4 (Gonzalez), which modernizes the California Advanced Service Fund (CASF). The CASF provides financial grants to qualified service providers to construct infrastructure needed to deploy broadband service in unserved and underserved areas. Additionally, RCRC supported AB 14 (Aguiar-Curry), a companion measure to SB 4, which will ensure that the state prioritizes deployment of highspeed internet to those most in need, like those communities in RCRC member counties.

In addition to deployment funding measures, numerous legislative proposals aimed at reducing local governments' role in siting, permitting, and leasing authority of broadband facilities were introduced in 2021. These measures would have further exacerbated the digital divide by incentivizing continued deployment growth in densely populated urban centers. RCRC worked with bill authors and sponsors on these measures to address local land use concerns.

RCRC has also continued to increase participation in broadband regulatory proceedings at the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), named as a formal party in five proceedings, focusing primarily on the implementation of SB 156.



Over 50% of rural households have no access to high-speed broadband.

2021

Noteworthy Issues



Board of Forestry

In April 2020, the Board of Forestry (BOF) proposed revisions to the State Fire Safe Regulations. There were several draft proposals released in 2021, with RCRC carefully monitoring the process, providing comments, and advocating for the needs of member counties, including diligent efforts to ensure that fire-prone areas of the state are not precluded from commercial, industrial, or residential development.

Throughout the process, the (BOF) has neglected to address RCRC concerns, continuing to move forward with the proposed revisions despite numerous requests from the public, local agencies and Legislative members to create a more collaborative process with local governments and other stakeholders. This was especially evident in March 2021 when the BOF considered a revised draft proposal that was released to the public earlier that month. Supervisors and county staff from 20 RCRC member counties made oral comments during the BOF board meeting, unanimously requesting that the BOF delay moving the proposal forward until it convenes a multidisciplinary working group of local government planning and fire safety experts to collaborate on the rulemaking language. Ultimately, the BOF disregarded those requests and approved the draft regulations for submission to the Office of Administrative Law in a six to two vote. The convening of a multidisciplinary working group has not happened, nor been attempted, to date. The BOF continues to move forward with significant changes to the Fire Safe Regulations without direct input of the agricultural community or local land use experts.

In 2021, RCRC successfully advocated for the inclusion of direct and flexible aid in the final version of the American Rescue Plan. With the emergence of virtual participation in public opening meetings due to the pandemic, RCRC advocated for Brown Act flexibilities for local governments to use teleconferencing for public meetings during declared emergencies. As California worked towards reopening, coronavirus relief, vaccine distribution, redistricting, and emergency response were the major focus of county operations during the year.

**County
Operations**



Board of Forestry County Operations Water and Drought

Water and Drought

While many of the legislative proposals introduced in 2021 have been tabled until next year, several items remain noteworthy:

- The Governor signed multiple bills that appropriated billions of dollars for new and existing water programs, including for multi-benefit use programs, and to assist water agencies with outstanding arrearage debt. He also signed an important drought planning bill that, among other new statutory requirements, will require counties to draft drought response plans and convene drought task forces.
- At the continued urging of California counties and localities, including RCRC member counties, the Newsom Administration reversed course in November from its previous refusal to declare a statewide drought emergency.
- RCRC is concerned about California Water Commission's plans to research, monitor, and possibly involve itself and the state in local or private groundwater trading programs and transactions in the future. Such a project could portend a new oversight or regulatory role by the commission and other state water agencies in groundwater.
- The recently signed bipartisan federal infrastructure bill includes \$8.3 billion for western water infrastructure--\$1 billion of which will be set aside for rural projects. The bill also includes \$100 million specifically for drought planning.

2021

Noteworthy Issues



California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC)

As of December 2021, RCRC was actively involved in ten CPUC proceedings across the energy and communications sectors.

RCRC has significantly increased engagement at the CPUC over the last several years, primarily efforts to reduce wildfire risk; increase energy reliability; improve communications reliability; and facilitate the deployment of broadband to unserved and underserved communities.

RCRC's focus on the CPUC has been a byproduct of our counties' devastating losses from utility-caused wildfires, the disproportionate impact public safety power shutoff (PSPS) events and other outages have had on our communities, and the need for significant utility infrastructure investment in rural areas.

Aside from extensive involvement in PSPS related proceedings, RCRC was a catalyst for CPUC establishing minimum resiliency thresholds for wireline communications providers. RCRC also joined other stakeholders in petitioning the CPUC to modify the Bioenergy Market Adjusting Tariff (BioMAT) program to facilitate continued development and deployment of bioenergy facilities.

In addition to engaging in the active regulatory proceedings, RCRC supported county-driven efforts to improve utility accountability. These included: working with Napa and Sonoma Counties to compel utilities to remove trees they cut down as part of their vegetation management programs; supporting El Dorado and Tuolumne Counties to address frequent and widespread outages associated with deployment of Enhanced Powerline Safety Settings; and complimenting county efforts to quickly restore service post-fire.

For a guide to RCRC's legislative advocacy of 2021, see the complete Legislative Digest, available on RCRC's website.

RCRC 2021
Legislative Digest



About RCRC

RCRC is dedicated to representing the collective unique interests of its membership, providing legislative and regulatory representation at the State and Federal levels, and providing responsible services to its members which will enhance and protect the quality of life in rural California counties.



Nearly 1 in 8 Californians reside in RCRC's rural counties



RCRC's 38 counties represent more than half of the state's total number of counties (58) and more than half (60 percent) of California's 155,779.22 square miles



More than 80% percent of U.S. Forest Service land in California lies within RCRC member counties



Nearly 75 percent of California's available water originates in the northern third of the state, while over 70 percent of the demand occurs in the southern two-thirds of the state and coastal areas

RCRC Affiliated Entites



**Rural Counties
Environmental Services
Joint Powers Authority
ESJPA**



**Golden State
Finance Authority®**



**GOLDEN STATE
NATURAL RESOURCES**
Preserve, Provide, Protect.



Golden State Connect Authority (Logo coming soon)

RCRC COUNTIES



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*Cover photo by Ramiro Ruiz (Monterey County), Winner
of the RCRC 2021 Rural County Photo Contest*