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## **California legislature delivers environmental justice for poor communities**

*Up to \$100 million a year would be spent to install solar panels on low-income, multifamily housing*

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by **Haya El Nasser** @hayaelna

LOS ANGELES — The national push for alternative energy sources often does not reach one of the largest segments of the U.S. population: low-income, minority communities. But a bill on California Gov. Jerry Brown's desk is the most ambitious in the nation to focus on a population that is frequently seen as the last to benefit from green technologies. [The Multi-Family Affordable Housing Solar Roofs](#) program will pay up to \$100 million a year for at least 10 years to install solar panels on 210,000 affordable housing units.

"It's the longest-term program. It makes the largest investment in getting solar into low-income communities and is the only program that gets the economic benefits of solar directly to tenants," said Amy Vanderwarker, a co-director of the [California Environmental Justice Alliance](#).

It's estimated that tenants would save more than \$38 million a year in utility bills and an additional \$19 million a year in benefits such as solar tax credits, for a total of \$1.8 billion over the life of the program.

"It's a huge deal," said Parin Shah, a senior strategist for the [Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#), based in Oakland, California. "There isn't anybody else putting resources where their rhetoric is."

And the solar bill is only one of five passed by the California legislature earlier this month that directly address environmental justice for poor communities of color — action cheered by environmental activists.

"It demonstrates the rising power of legislators in the [Central] Valley who can speak to the needs of working families and immigrant communities and low-income Californians," Shah said.

In a state where 89 percent of the people who live in the top 10 percent of polluted communities are people of color, the pressure to protect and benefit these neighborhoods is gaining momentum.

This year's legislative session saw an unprecedented level of discussion and action addressing



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issues of environmental equity, reflecting the growing number of minorities elected to office, Vanderwarker said.

According to the [California Environmental Protection Agency](#), 1 in 3 Latinos and 1 in 4 African-Americans lives in polluted areas. Studies show that more than 25 percent of black schoolchildren in Los Angeles suffer from asthma.

A series of recent [polls](#) show that [Latinos are very concerned about climate change](#) and are committed to conservation and environmental protection.

“The impact on communities of color has been a main topic of discussion,” Vanderwarker said. “It’s a huge win. It reflects a shift of how environmental policy is approached.”

Among the bills awaiting the governor’s signature are [Assembly Bill 1071](#), which would create a policy to return a portion of fines levied against polluters to the communities they polluted.

“This is really about the idea that communities most affected by violations can see some benefits,” Vanderwarker said.

Another, [Assembly Bill 1288](#), would add two representatives who work directly with low-income communities to the California Air Resources Board.

And [Senate Bill 350](#), would increase the state’s goal for the share of energy generated from renewable resources from 33 percent to 50 percent by 2030 and aims to double energy efficiency in buildings by 2030.

“It’s the most ambitious target in the country,” said Shah, who expects it to lead to an upgrade of old housing in poorer communities.

“They’re pretty leaky in terms of how energy efficient they are, and it’s costing the residents money in utility bills,” he said. “Some of these buildings will need to be retrofitted. It will save the state a bunch of energy, and it will lower utility bills.”

[Senate Bill 673](#) would toughen the permitting process for hazardous waste facilities in poor neighborhoods. Over 80 percent of people living near hazardous waste facilities are people of color.

Legislators “are approaching these issues through the lens of quality of life,” Shah said. “This is probably what environmental policy is going to look like in the future.”

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