

# **Environmental justice requires meaningful community involvement**

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**State Assemblyman Robert Rivas writes that AB 1628 will elevate the opinions of communities most impacted by pollution.**

*This community opinion was contributed by State Assemblyman Robert Rivas. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent BenitoLink or other affiliated contributors.*

**Every day**, our state's most disadvantaged communities endure alarming disparities in pollution and face health hazards where they live, work, play, and go to school. Whether it's access to clean air and drinking water, neighborhood parks, safe and affordable housing, or accessible public transit, it is clear that we must do more to ensure everyone's right to a healthy and clean environment.

These problems and injustices often arise when communities are denied a voice in key environmental and land use decisions that impact their lives. People who live in Environmental Justice (EJ) communities—where multiple sources of pollution and social vulnerability create disproportionate

burdens—still have a right to be involved in these decisions that affect their livelihoods. But many local governments and state agencies could do more to involve impacted EJ communities when developing and implementing environmental laws, policies, and programs.

As currently defined in state law, “Environmental Justice” means, “The fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and incomes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” California began addressing the issues of environmental justice in 1999 when SB 119 was passed and designated the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR) as the lead agency in state government for EJ programs. Since that time, it is clear that impacted communities across the state need to be meaningfully involved in defining “environmental justice” if their unique needs and concerns are to be elevated and addressed.

That is why I am proud to have introduced **AB 1628**, a bill sponsored by the **California Environmental Justice Alliance** that would add “meaningful involvement” to the definition of environmental justice to ensure all voices are heard. AB 1628 will elevate the opinions of communities most impacted by pollution and public health hazards opinions from vulnerable communities that should have a say when it comes to decisions impacting their environment and public health.

In Shafter, CA, residents have long endured air and groundwater pollution from neighboring industrial facilities and farms. However, the **California Air Resources Board** and their regional pollution control district have been able to get a better understanding of the toxins in the air after partnering with local Shafter residents in an effort to reduce air pollutions in their neighborhoods. Residents have been providing critical data and are speaking for themselves on the local steering committees that are shaping plans for pollution reporting, monitoring, and reduction. EJ communities have long fought for a seat at the table and AB 1628 would help empower communities to have a stronger voice in the decision making process.

AB 1628 recently passed both houses of the State Legislature and is currently pending consideration by Governor Newsom. We have an opportunity to ensure that impacted communities across California will be meaningfully involved in the decisions impacting their health and well-being. Environmental justice isn't just about government making policies and decisions for communities, it's about ensuring that these impacted communities have an opportunity to speak for themselves and serve as active partners in deciding what is best for their community.