



California must lead on climate change mitigation



BY SARA ZIMMERMAN

OPINION – The Trump administration has reversed our nation’s longstanding commitment to addressing climate change by directing the U.S to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, slashing funding for clean energy projects, fast-tracking fossil fuel production, and attacking environmental justice efforts. These actions will exacerbate the dangers of a changing climate that Californians are already experiencing, including year-round wildfire risk, violent storms, extreme heat, prolonged droughts, sea level rise, and more.

California’s leaders know we must continue to lead the fight against this existential threat. It’s been nearly two decades since the groundbreaking law, AB 32, established our state’s ambitious goals for reducing climate-harming greenhouse gas emissions. But there is much more to do.

One of the tools that keeps us on track is the California Environmental Quality Act, or CEQA. CEQA requires environmental impact reports (EIRs) for projects with serious environmental consequences. EIRs provide basic information about how new projects would affect air quality, wildlife, traffic, noise, and water resources. They also identify measures to reduce these impacts and address comments and concerns from neighbors and community members.

The Legislature has also mandated that EIRs evaluate and reduce a project’s greenhouse gas emissions whenever possible – requirements the courts have enforced for port operations, transportation plans, and other major projects. CEQA is the primary mechanism for understanding how proposed industrial projects affect emissions.

Just when California’s environmental leadership is most needed, however, CEQA is under attack. While CEQA’s detractors often invoke the housing crisis, this is a smoke screen. Infill housing that is consistent with local zoning is already largely exempt from CEQA. So are many “green” projects.

We see this pattern in a troubling new bill that would weaken CEQA’s role in curbing climate change-inducing pollution. While presented as pro-housing, the bill is *not* narrowly targeted on housing. Instead, SB 607 (Wiener) would weaken CEQA across the board. SB 607’s most radical provisions apply to nearly all projects, ranging from freeways to railyards to power plants.

Under current law, an EIR must be prepared when there is a fair argument, based on substantial evidence, that a proposed project may significantly harm the environment or public health. When in doubt, the law calls for in-depth environmental review to be completed. This makes sense, because our uncertainty about harmful impacts will be resolved by the EIR. But SB 607 does the opposite, instead giving polluters the benefit of the doubt. Scientific evidence about substantial greenhouse gas emissions or pollution could be outweighed, for example, by a letter submitted by a developer claiming the opposite.

Again, these provisions apply to virtually *all* projects, not just housing. Under SB 607, comprehensive environmental review of all kinds of projects will be less common. Residents will be hamstrung in fighting toxic industrial development in their neighborhoods and Californians will lose one of their main tools for tracking and reducing climate change impacts from new development.

California’s communities should think twice before giving up their environmental rights. Every Californian bears the burden of poorly planned and unchecked development: from wildfires and droughts to local impacts like air pollution and loss of farmland. CEQA does not prevent needed housing or industry from being built. Rather, CEQA’s most common effect is that developers take steps to avoid or mitigate harm from projects, including measures to reduce pollution, increase sustainability, cut water use, and protect public health and wellbeing. And CEQA almost always achieves these benefits without anyone ever stepping into a courtroom.

With federal environmental policies on the chopping block, we need CEQA to protect California’s leadership on climate, as well as the health and well-being of the people of California. Legislators should reject SB 607, and keep CEQA strong.



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