



SB 342 (Gonzalez) South Coast Air Quality Management District Board Environmental Justice Representation

SUMMARY

Senate Bill (SB) 342 will empower community involvement and promote equity by adding two environmental justice representatives to the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) governing board.

Specifically, SB 342 will add two new representatives, one appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules, and one by the Speaker of the Assembly, who must reside in and work directly with communities in the South Coast air basin that are disproportionately burdened by high levels of pollution and issues of environmental justice, including, but not limited to, communities with diverse racial and ethnic populations and communities with low-income populations.

BACKGROUND/PROBLEM

Local air districts and their governing boards have primary jurisdiction over air pollution from all stationary sources in their air basin.

As prescribed by state law, the SCAQMD board is made up of 13 members, where three are appointed by the state (one each by the Senate Rules Committee, the Speaker of the Assembly, and the Governor) and 10 are appointed by local governments. The members of the board serve four-year terms.

South Coast air basin, despite significant air quality improvements over the last several decades, has some of the worst air quality in the nation. The South Coast Air basin is home to many commercial establishments such

as auto body shops, metal manufacturing facilities, oil and gas extraction sites, and other industrial land sites, freeways and high-volume thoroughfares, which emit harmful gases and particles. These pollution sources are often concentrated in historically disadvantaged communities where the elevated local air pollution interacts with other socio-economic and environmental determinants of health, significantly impacting the health and well-being of residents.

Fine particulate pollution poses an especially critical health danger for children, the elderly, and people with existing health problems. Exposure to particulate matter 2.5 is also linked to cardiovascular disease. The California Air Resources Board (ARB) estimates that in California, 9,000 deaths a year, 7,200 premature deaths, 1,900 hospitalizations, and 5,200 emergency room visits are attributed to particulate matter pollution exposure^{1,2}. Further, evidence shows that people with low incomes may face higher risk from air pollution, and studies have found that Latinos, Asians, American Indians/Alaska Natives and especially African Americans experienced higher risks of harm—including premature death—from exposure to air pollution³.

¹ California Air Resources Board. Health & Air Pollution. <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/resources/health-air-pollution>

² Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. Criteria air pollutants - toxicology and environmental assessment. County of Los Angeles. <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh/tea/toxicepi/criteriaairpollutants.htm#:~:text=A%20recent%20study%20by%20the,9%2C000%20deaths%20in%20California%20annually>

³ American Lung Association, State of the Air 2020 report, <https://www.stateoftheair.org/assets/SOTA-2020.pdf>

Given the disproportionate health and environmental impacts of air pollution on low-income and communities of color, the state has passed legislation to increase access, promote inclusion and diversity, and incorporate environmental justice representatives to air quality boards. For example, AB 1288 (Atkins, Chapter 586, Statutes of 2015) expanded the Board membership of ARB from 12 to 14 members, and required that those members be persons who work directly with pollution-burdened and vulnerable communities.

In 2019, the Legislature passed and Governor signed AB 423 (Gloria, Chapter 744, Statutes of 2019), which revamped the governing board of the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District, and among other things added three new representatives from the public, with designated expertise as a public health professional, an air pollution specialist, and an environmental justice expert.

SOLUTION

Communities in the South Coast air basin face historic, and multiple, synergistic and cumulative environmental health stressors. Appointing members to the SCAQMD board that will represent and work directly with their communities will drive significant changes to protect the well-being of people in that community. In addition, access to membership on boards provides a path to other positions in governmental leadership to individuals from historically underrepresented populations.

By adding two environmental justice representatives to SCAQMD's governing board, SB 342 will help tip the scales towards justice for communities that are disproportionately impacted by outdoor pollution in the South Coast air basin and incorporate diverse viewpoints on local public resources and air quality policies. It is now that we need to deliberately include environmental justice voices and establish active long-term community representation, as we struggle to meet federal air quality standards and tackle one of our most pressing health equity issues.

SUPPORT

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