July 22, 2021

California Citizens Redistricting Commission
721 Capitol Mall, Suite 260
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Outreach Zone E Central Coast Communities of Interest

Dear Redistricting Commissioners,

The Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE) writes to you as a longstanding community organization representing working-class immigrant communities of color in the Central Coast. Throughout our organization’s history we have been committed to voting rights for our communities, and have engaged in various city, county, state, and federal redistricting processes in the region since 2001. The California Citizens Redistricting Commission significantly improved representation of working-class immigrant communities in the Central Coast 10 years ago, but there is still work to be done. Thank you for the opportunity to present information about our region and our communities in order to inform the redistricting process.

The following comments identify important Communities of Interest in the Central Coast who face social, economic, and environmental disparities and have historically experienced political underrepresentation. While the Central Coast is often known to visitors for its sweeping coastlines, scenic mountains, and fertile soil, the region’s economy depends on a large workforce of low-wage immigrant workers in the agriculture and hospitality industries who struggle to survive. Our working-class immigrant families are concentrated in neighborhoods and communities with long legacies of racial segregation and have faced forced displacement from the region’s exclusive luxury enclaves. Communities of color in the region have historically been sacrificed as the sites of heaviest impacts from oil and gas development, toxic agricultural chemicals, and depleted groundwater.
The six-county Central Coast region is majority people of color (54%), with the largest non-white group being Latino (43%). However, many communities in the region are over 80% people of color due to stark patterns of residential segregation. For adequate representation in the Central Coast under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, we believe the California Citizens Redistricting Commission should seek to create at least two “majority-minority” Assembly Districts, centered around the Salinas Valley and Oxnard Plain areas, and one “majority-minority” Senate District, uniting the Oxnard Plain and Santa Maria Valley. Other smaller communities with majority residents of color including the Pajaro Valley, Lompoc Valley, and Santa Clara Valley should be included in these districts with larger “majority-minority” communities in order to maximize their representation.

Many of our communities (Oxnard, Santa Maria, Salinas, and Watsonville) originate in a shared history of development by the sugarbeet industry, a turn-of-the-century boom in sugar production using beets instead of cane that sought to supply the lucrative global sugar trade, which had experienced massive disruption and uncertainty since the emancipation of slaves in the mid-1800’s. Towering industrial sugarbeet refineries were built in these communities, converting the surrounding farmland to rows of beets requiring intensive stoop labor to harvest, recruiting a large workforce of non-white immigrant workers. Although all of these towns have now shifted from sugarbeets to strawberries, they remain immigrant farmworker enclaves, with economies based in labor-intensive row crops, and environmental health impacted by land-use patterns rooted in heavy industrial agriculture. Histories of exclusion and displacement of communities of color in nearby more affluent cities like Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Ventura, Monterey, and Santa Cruz also contributed to this pattern of residential segregation throughout our region.

We identify the following sub-regions within the Central Coast as high-priority Communities of Interest to ensure fair representation.

Priority Sub-Regions

We identify three major priority sub-regions, or clusters of predominantly Latino working-class immigrant agricultural cities throughout the Central Coast. These have the potential to be grouped in districts to maximize their representation, and often have been in the past, with
notable exceptions where they are divided, limiting the number of “majority-minority” districts in the region.

The first and largest priority sub-region is in Western Ventura County, centered around the Oxnard Plain. The major city of Oxnard anchors this region, a diverse agricultural hub with heavy industry including a commercial port and two naval bases, including smaller communities in Greater Oxnard like Port Hueneme, El Rio, Nyeland Acres. Oxnard lies below the mouth of the Santa Clara River, which carves the fertile agricultural plain it was built on. Farther up the Santa Clara River, the small rural cities of the Santa Clara Valley including Santa Paula, Fillmore, and Piru are also heavily Latino immigrant farmworker communities that should be grouped in districts with the Oxnard Plain.

The second priority sub-region is in Northern Santa Barbara County. The largest community is the Santa Maria Valley, which is anchored by the major agricultural city of Santa Maria, as well as surrounding rural farmworker towns including Guadalupe and Tanglewood. The nearby Lompoc Valley including the city of Lompoc shares similar characteristics as a diverse majority Latino community rooted in agriculture as well as the nearby prison and military base.
The third priority sub-region includes both the Salinas Valley in Monterey County and the Pajaro Valley in Santa Cruz County. The Salinas Valley is anchored by the major agricultural city of Salinas, and stretches up the length of the Salinas River to include the towns of Gonzales, Soledad, Greenfield, and King City. The nearby Pajaro Valley, including the city of Watsonville, shares similar demographic, historical, economic, and environmental characteristics to the Salinas Valley.
In the following sections, we will compare the social, economic, and environmental characteristics of these priority sub-regions to the broader Central Coast region to demonstrate their unique importance as communities of interest. For brevity, we will use the anchor cities of Oxnard, Santa Maria and Salinas, but the smaller surrounding towns we have identified share similar demographics.

**Social Characteristics**

Throughout its history, the Central Coast has been home to deep-rooted immigrant communities who have often lacked political representation, in particular due to large shares of undocumented residents who work in agriculture. In fact, Monterey County (12.5%) and Santa Barbara County (9%) have the first and second highest undocumented shares of total population in California, according to the USC Equity Research Institute. However, the Central Coast’s immigrant communities are not evenly distributed throughout the region, but concentrated in key communities of interest that must be fairly represented by state and federal districts. In particular, due to the large share of population who are ineligible to vote or face barriers to civic participation as newly naturalized citizens or children of immigrant parents, if not protected by their own districts, heavily immigrant communities can easily be outvoted and have their voices drowned out by other nearby communities with much higher rates of voter turnout.

Overall, 28% of the six-county Central Coast region’s population are immigrants and 16% are non-citizens (according to the 2019 American Community Survey 5 year estimates, the best available data prior to the 2020 Census). Priority sub-regions such as the Salinas Valley, Santa Maria Valley, and Oxnard Plain have significantly higher shares of immigrant communities than surrounding areas. The City of Oxnard is 35% immigrant and 20% non-citizen, Santa Maria is 35% immigrant and 26% non-citizen, and Salinas is 37% immigrant and 29% non-citizen.
Foreign-Born Population, Redistricting Equity Indicators

Another barrier to political representation for immigrant communities in the Central Coast is linguistic isolation, which can prevent voters from accessing information about elections, issues, and political candidates and limit participation in civic groups and public forums. Again, we see the same priority communities of interest have far higher shares of linguistic isolation than the regional average.

Overall, 39% of the Central Coast region speaks a language other than English at home, and 16% speak English less than “very well”. In Oxnard, 66% of residents speak a language other than English at home and 30% speak English less than “very well”. In Santa Maria, 66% speak another language at home and 34% have limited English proficiency. In Salinas, these numbers rise to 72% and 38%.
Limited English Proficiency, Redistricting Equity Indicators

Finally, while the Central Coast region has roughly similar shares of Latino and white residents, the priority sub-regions we identify are predominantly Latino and other people of color. The six-county region is 54% people of color and 43% Latino. By contrast, Oxnard is 86% people of color and 74% Latino, Santa Maria is 82% people of color and 75% Latino, and Salinas is 86% people of color and 77% Latino. By uniting majority Latino communities, there may be potential to draw additional “majority-minority” districts in the Central Coast regions that are currently diluted by dividing communities of interest, particularly in the Assembly in Ventura County.

Latino Population, Redistricting Equity Indicators

Economic Characteristics

Agriculture has historically been the largest industry in the semi-rural Central Coast area, with large numbers of farmworkers in labor-intensive crops like strawberries and lettuce. However, the region’s farmworkers are heavily concentrated in the priority communities we have identified that have long experienced high levels of poverty and racial and economic segregation. Despite its essential importance, work in sectors like agriculture and domestic service typically performed by immigrants and people of color has historically been undervalued, leading to extremely low wages, particularly compared to the high cost of living in coastal California. Many immigrant workers are also excluded from many government assistance programs due to lack of documentation, resulting in even deeper disparities in education, healthcare, and housing.
The Central Coast’s political representatives have historically come from its more affluent communities like Thousand Oaks, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Monterey and Santa Cruz. Wealthier communities have more resources to contribute to political campaigns and often receive more political representation as a result. Meanwhile poorer and working-class communities face barriers to civic participation including less leisure time to research issues and vote, education barriers to accessing information about elections, and housing instability often resulting in lapsed voter registration after moving. Grouping working-class communities together in districts helps to ensure fair representation for voters across the economic spectrum.

Agricultural workers who are eligible to vote face unique barriers to voting due to migratory seasonal work and long and irregular working hours. In the six-county Central Coast region, 8% of the employed population over the age of 16 work in agriculture. In Oxnard, 14% of workers are employed in the agriculture industry, in Santa Maria, 28% are in agriculture, and in Salinas, 24%. Farmworker issues such as safety protections from extreme heat and rights to overtime pay and union representation have been controversial topics in the legislature, and farmworker communities must be adequately represented.

Severe housing challenges among low-income communities often result in overcrowded housing where multiple families live together in one unit or extended families share a small apartment in order to make rent. While 8% of housing units in the six-county region are considered overcrowded, 18% of units are overcrowded in Oxnard, 23% are in Santa Maria, and 19% are in Salinas. Although all of California faces a housing crisis, our communities living with its most severe impacts are a crucial voice that must be heard.
Overcrowded Housing, Healthy Places Index

The Central Coast’s immigrant communities face some of the lowest levels of health coverage in the state, both because many low-wage workers like farmworkers are not provided employer health insurance, and because undocumented residents are often excluded from public healthcare assistance programs like MediCal. While 8% of Central Coast residents lack health coverage, 17% of Oxnard residents, 18% of Santa Maria residents, and 13% of Salinas residents, are uninsured.

Uninsured Residents, Healthy Places Index

Many immigrant and low-income communities face stark educational disparities, with economic challenges to pursuing their education and often limited resources from federal financial aid. While 17% of residents over the age of 25 in the Central Coast have less than a high school education, 30% of Oxnard residents, 40% of Santa Maria residents, and 41% of Salinas residents lack a high school diploma.
Population without a Bachelor’s Degree, Healthy Places Index

Education, healthcare, and housing are often issues at the forefront of priorities for legislators who come from low-income and immigrant communities because of the challenges their constituents face. However, representatives from wealthier areas often have different priorities. It is vital for our working-class communities in the Central Coast to be represented in order to address the longstanding disparities that impact us.

Environmental Characteristics

Environmental features like communities being connected to or divided by coasts, mountains, and rivers have long been a major part of redistricting processes. But as California becomes increasingly conscious of environmental justice and environmental racism in policymaking, this should inform our redistricting efforts as well. Extensive research has documented that toxic pollution is disproportionately concentrated in communities of color. Communities of interest are not only those who share environmental assets such as pristine coastlines and scenic mountains, but those who share impacts like contaminated groundwater aquifers, diesel exhaust choked trucking routes, or proximity to oil refineries and power plants. This helps to ensure elected representatives are focused on the environmental health needs and challenges facing our communities. The California Citizens Redistricting Commission can utilize the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment’s mapping tool for environmental justice, Cal
Enviroscreen, which identifies socioeconomically disadvantaged populations throughout the state who are disproportionately impacted by pollution and other environmental harms.

Cal Enviroscreen 3.0, OEHHA

A major environmental justice challenge faced by farmworker communities in the Central Coast is groundwater overdraft and contamination. Long-term use of groundwater for industrial agriculture has steadily depleted many of these basins for decades, leading to higher concentrations of pollution, dwindling supplies of water for drinking and irrigation, and the intrusion of saltwater in from the ocean. In many rural low-income communities in the Central Coast, groundwater wells make up all or a significant part of the drinking water, and are especially vulnerable to pollution. The Oxnard Plain area of the Santa Clara River Valley groundwater basin and parts of the Salinas Valley and Pajaro Valley are considered critically overdrafted by the California Department of Water Resources. The Santa Maria Valley groundwater basin and Santa Paula area of the Santa Clara Valley basin are adjudicated areas, meaning court orders have forced allocations of groundwater resources to prevent them from being depleted. Keeping these threatened groundwater basins together within the same districts will better ensure state legislators address the crisis of water in rural agricultural communities in the Central Coast to ensure sustainable and safe drinking water for disadvantaged communities.
Critically Overdrafted (red) and Adjudicated (shaded) Groundwater Basins, CDWR

Oil and gas development in the Central Coast has also been heavily concentrated in communities of color. Ventura County is California’s 3rd largest oil-producing county, with most wells clustered in majority Latino areas in the western part of the county like the Westside of Ventura, Santa Paula, Fillmore, and Oxnard. Santa Barbara County is also a major oil producer, with active oilfields primarily concentrated in the Santa Maria Valley. The Santa Maria Valley also has two oil refineries, some of the only refineries remaining in the Central Coast. Another major oilfield is in San Ardo, at the remote end of the Salinas Valley. Oil issues are a major challenge facing California legislators, as oil production results in air and water pollution impacting nearby communities, and faces growing calls to be phased out to address climate change. Power plants lining the Central Coast that use ocean water for cooling have been disproportionately concentrated near communities of color, including a cluster of three power plants in Oxnard, and the Moss Landing power plant near Salinas and Watsonville. Many of these ocean-cooling power plants are now being decommissioned due to their environmental harms, presenting a unique challenge that lawmakers must address in how to replace their energy and remove the abandoned structures.

Finally, the Oxnard Plain, Santa Maria Valley, and Salinas Valley are hotspots of toxic agricultural pesticide use, particularly due to the strawberry industry concentrated in these communities which uses large amounts of fumigator pesticides linked to respiratory disease, cancer, and reproductive and developmental damage in pregnant mothers and children. Because of the close proximity of agricultural fields to residential communities, a 2014 analysis by the Public Health Institute of California Department of Public Health data found that Monterey
County had the largest percentage of students attending school near the highest uses of the most toxic pesticides (concentrated in the Salinas area) and Ventura County (particularly the Oxnard area) had the highest total number of students attending school near high levels of dangerous pesticide use. A major 1999-2011 longitudinal UC Berkeley study followed children of farmworkers in the Salinas Valley and found severe developmental impacts from pesticide exposure. The Center for Investigative Reporting conducted an analysis of pesticide use in California from 2003-2012, identifying hotspots of the highest concentrations of the most harmful pesticides, including carcinogens and developmental toxins, with the three most impacted areas being Oxnard, Salinas, and Santa Maria. As California discusses pesticide policies such as school buffer zones and notification requirements, ensuring these heavily impacted agricultural valleys have strong district representation is vital to protecting the health of farmworker communities.

Pesticide Hotspots, Center for Investigative Reporting
Priority Communities of Interest in the Central Coast Must be Represented

Redistricting Equity Index, Advancement Project

The Central Coast is a region with vast disparities between communities that are predominantly white and predominantly Latino, communities built on luxury tourism and those built on industrial agriculture, and communities that enjoy our region’s greatest environmental assets and those that face our greatest pollution threats. Without unifying the voices of immigrant, working-class, and environmental justice communities in “majority-minority” districts, underrepresented communities will be unable to elect our representatives of choice as more affluent communities with greater social advantages dominate elections. We have identified our highest priority sub-regions in the Central Coast to protect representation as encompassing the communities of interest in the Salinas and Pajaro Valleys (Monterey and South Santa Cruz County), Santa Maria and Lompoc Valleys (North Santa Barbara County), and Oxnard Plain and Santa Clara Valleys (West Ventura County). We urge the California Citizens Redistricting Commission to keep these critical communities of interest whole and maximize their representation. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Maricela Morales
Executive Director
Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE)