

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, August 12, 2026 11:06 PM
To: Inquiries, DAC
Subject: Comment on Preliminary 2026 DAC Designation rural high-desert exclusion, Morongo Basin, San Bernardino County

EXTERNAL:

To the CalEPA Disadvantaged Communities Designation Team:

I am a resident of Morongo Valley, in the Morongo Basin of San Bernardino County. I am writing to comment on the Preliminary 2026 Disadvantaged Communities Designation, and to ask CalEPA to address a structural gap that excludes rural high desert communities like mine.

THE ISSUE

No census tract in the Morongo Basin is included in the preliminary 2026 designation. That covers Morongo Valley, Yucca Valley, Joshua Tree, Twentynine Palms, Landers, Wonder Valley, and Pioneertown, which is roughly 70,000 people. The basin was also excluded from the 2022 designation, and the new indicators in CalEnviroScreen 5.0 did not change that outcome.

This is not because our community is doing well. Median household income in Yucca Valley is approximately \$44,000, which is roughly half the California statewide median. Average rent in Joshua Tree is now above \$2,000 per month, more than half of median gross household income. Our population skews heavily elderly, disabled, veteran, and fixed income.

Immediately over the pass, Coachella Valley communities with comparable poverty are designated. The designation map effectively draws a line at the top of the pass.

WHY I BELIEVE THIS HAPPENS

CalEnviroScreen combines pollution burden with population characteristics. Our community scores near the floor on pollution burden. We have no refineries, no ports, no freight corridors, and almost no industry. Our severe socioeconomic burden is therefore multiplied by a near zero pollution score, and our need becomes invisible to the index.

The result is a tool that systematically misses rural poverty. A poor community with clean air can score in the middle of an index that was designed to find burdened communities.

EXTREME HEAT IS OUR ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD

Our primary environmental health threat is not industrial pollution. It is heat. Summer temperatures here routinely reach 105 to 115 degrees. For our elderly, disabled, and fixed income residents, air conditioning is a medical necessity rather than a comfort, and summer electricity costs are a serious hardship. Heat related illness and death are real risks in this community every year.

CalEnviroScreen does not meaningfully capture extreme heat exposure. As a result, the single largest environmental health threat facing this community is not visible to the index that determines whether we receive assistance.

I would also note that SB 535 directs that the designation be based on geographic, socioeconomic, public health, and environmental hazard criteria. Extreme heat is an environmental hazard, and our geography is precisely what produces it.

THE PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCE

Because we are not designated, our residents cannot access DAC-SASH. And because the original SASH program has been closed to new applicants since 2021, there is now no low income rooftop solar pathway available in this basin at all.

That means some of the hottest, sunniest, and lowest income communities in California, where cooling costs are among the highest household burdens, are excluded from the state's low income solar program entirely. I do not believe that is the outcome the Legislature intended.

WHAT I AM ASKING FOR

1. That CalEPA develop and incorporate an extreme heat exposure indicator, so that climate driven health risk in desert communities is measurable within the designation.
2. That CalEPA create a supplemental designation pathway for census tracts with severe socioeconomic and public health burden that are excluded solely because they lack industrial pollution sources.
3. In the alternative, that CalEPA clearly document how rural, low income, high heat communities are expected to access California Climate Investments, so that agencies and program administrators can direct the AB 1550 low income community allocation to communities like ours.

I appreciate that CalEnviroScreen 5.0 was developed through a co-design process with community based organizations, and I am submitting this comment in that spirit. Our community is not asking to be prioritized over more polluted places. We are asking that the tool be able to see us at all.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Joshua De La Rosa

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature of Joshua De La Rosa.

Resident, Morongo Basin, San Bernardino County