

Foreword

*Abby Neal & Jordan Perry**

Nearly six million Californians live in disadvantaged unincorporated communities. These places are outside the official boundaries of any city. Therefore, they lack a local government to coordinate their municipal services like drinking water, sewage, and wastewater management. Often, no specific entity is responsible for infrastructure like paved roads, sidewalks, and streetlights. These communities—which tend to be home to people of color, Indigenous people, and immigrants—face unique challenges that are often overlooked in conversations about resource access.

To help place a much-needed spotlight on these issues, we are thrilled to present *Ecology Law Quarterly*'s Volume 52 Special Issue. This issue comprises the transcript of the 2026 *Ecology Law Quarterly* Symposium, titled *Rural Unincorporated California: The Growth of Cities and Who is Left Behind*. Organized by Symposium Director Austin McNichols with the support of Assistant Symposium Editors Madeleine Nielsen and Lauren Witt, the Symposium brought together lawyers and other experts from across the environmental field to grapple with the important work of advocating for rural unincorporated communities.

While this Special Issue focuses on disadvantaged unincorporated communities, or DUCs, unincorporated communities are no monolith. These communities range from extremely wealthy to extremely under-resourced, from miles away to steps outside a city's borders. To help the audience better contextualize these communities and their challenges, Camille Pannu, Associate Clinical Professor of Law at Columbia Law School, started the Symposium with a discussion of the big picture: What is unincorporated California, and how does it intersect with environmental justice?

The second panel brought an on-the-ground perspective of organizers working at the local and state levels to improve drinking water access. Miguel Rojas-Flores from the Community Water Center discussed the unique legal, structural, and practical challenges of providing clean drinking water to DUCs.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38J38KM5W>

Copyright © 2025 Regents of the University of California.

* Editors-in-Chief, 2025–2026, *Ecology Law Quarterly*.

From his work in the San Joaquin Valley, Rojas-Flores shared how communities fight for cities that do not formally represent them to consider their needs.

The third discussion centered another multifaceted issue facing many DUCs in California: housing and sustainable growth. Nick Jensen from California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA) and Monica Heger from the California Department of Justice discussed how legally mandated general plans can be a double-edged sword that enshrine or hinder environmental justice initiatives. Jensen and Heger provided insight into how SB 1000, which requires counties to incorporate environmental justice into general plans, provides a tool for both communities and the state to push for the former.

The final panel brought together experts doing groundbreaking work in the field to discuss the legal barriers to improving drinking water and wastewater systems in rural unincorporated communities. Elias Rodriguez and Leticia Casillas-Luquin from CLRA, Nataly Escobedo Garcia from Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, and Kristin Dobbin from the U.C. Berkeley Rausser College of Natural Resources brought the audience along through case studies of their efforts to improve drinking water and wastewater systems in rural unincorporated areas.

In this Special Issue, we hope to bring attention to the myriad of intersecting environmental, infrastructural, and governance challenges that California's unincorporated communities have long faced. We also hope to highlight many of the creative solutions these communities are developing and implementing, which incorporate expertise in legal frameworks, community organizing, and advocacy. *Ecology Law Quarterly* is thrilled to provide a platform for this incredible work and thanks everyone who made the event and the subsequent publication of its transcript possible.