

Introduction

Abby Neal, Jordan Perry,** & Austin McNichols****

Austin McNichols: Okay. Good morning, everyone. Thank you all for being here for [*Ecology Law Quarterly's*] (*ELQ's*) annual symposium. This year's topic is *Rural Unincorporated California*. So, to start us off, our co-editors-in-chief, Jordan Perry and Abby Neal, are going to make some opening remarks. Thank you so much.

Abby Neal: Hi everyone. Welcome to the 2026 *Ecology Law Quarterly* Annual Symposium. Thank you all for joining us here today.

We'd like to begin by sharing the U.C. Berkeley land acknowledgement. Today, we recognize that UC Berkeley sits in the territory of Huichin, the annual ancestral homeland of the Chochenyo-speaking Ohlone people, the successors of the sovereign Verona Band of Alameda County. This region continues to be of great importance to the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe and other familial descendants of the Verona Band.

We recognize that every member of the Berkeley community has and continues to benefit from the use and occupation of this land since the institution's founding in 1868. Consistent with our values of community, inclusion and diversity, we have a responsibility to acknowledge and make visible the university's relation to Native peoples. As members of the U.C. Berkeley community, it is vitally important that we not only recognize the history of the land on which we all stand, but also recognize the Muwekma Ohlone people are alive and flourishing members of the U.C. Berkeley and broader Bay Area communities today.

Jordan Perry: And while, of course, it's important to acknowledge the land that we're on, it's also really important to acknowledge that that's not all we can do to address the history of dispossession of Native lands. In particular, we want to draw your attention to the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, which is a local

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Bay Area Indigenous woman-led organization for the Land Back Movement. The Land Back Movement is an Indigenous-led effort advocating for the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty and the stewardship of their ancestral lands.

One option to help out is by paying a Shuumi, or a voluntary annual tax for non-Native residents, to help them fund land acquisition, which you can learn more about at the Sogorea Te' Land Trust website.

Abby: I'm Abby Neal.

Jordan: And I'm Jordan Perry. And thank you all so much for coming today. We have the pleasure of being the co-editors-in-chief of *Ecology Law Quarterly*, or *ELQ*, for the 2025 through 2026 academic school year.

For those of you who are less familiar with the journal, *ELQ* is one of the first environmental law journals in the United States. It was founded in 1971, and we publish four editions each year, ranging on topics from environmental justice to energy law to natural resource law to animal law to water law. We're an entirely student-run operation and are publishing at the highest caliber of legal scholarship.

We are incredibly proud that academics, practitioners, and students all seek to be published in *ELQ*, and that we've been cited in many decisions by the United States Supreme Court. But just as the global environmental movement has changed since the 1970s, so has *ELQ* and the focus of our publication. Environmental issues inherently intersect with other issues of social concern, and over the years we've been aiming to publish and push the conventional boundaries of environmental law, and the annual symposium has been an incredible part of that. It serves as the basis of our point-four edition, so for example, we'll be publishing 52.4 very soon. That covered last year's symposium. The symposium has become an opportunity to really deliberately expand the voices heard in environmental law and legal scholarship beyond those of traditional academia.

By bringing in lawyers and experts from across the environmental field and other disciplines, we really hope to create a resource in the environmental law that can be shared with you all here today and countless readers to come through our publication.

Abby: This year, the Annual *Ecology Law Quarterly* Symposium, *Rural Unincorporated California: The Growth of California Cities and Who Is Left Behind*, will focus on the struggles for resource access faced by disadvantaged, unincorporated communities in California. These places are outside the official boundaries of any city, so they lack a local government to coordinate their municipal services like drinking water, sewage, and wastewater management, and infrastructure like paved roads, sidewalks, and streetlights. These communities face unique legal, structural, and practical challenges to meet people's needs that are often overlooked in conversations about resource access.

This symposium will highlight the ongoing advocacy work for these rural communities and the fights for drinking water and water access, sustainable growth, and more.

Jordan: So, more specifically, here's what we can look forward to today, a really quick overview. We'll start the day by considering the big picture. What is unincorporated California, and what are its environmental justice implications?

From the intentional exclusion of unincorporated communities from resources and the intentional push of people of color into these communities, unincorporated community status has implications for equitable resource assets, human health, and more.

Abby: Next, we'll get an on-the-ground perspective about community organizing in unincorporated California, ranging from the local level to the state level. Many Californians still lack access to clean, safe drinking water and wastewater treatment infrastructure, and we'll hear about the unique challenges of helping a community advocate for water access before a water district or city board that does not represent it.

Jordan: Then, following our lunch break, we'll hear a discussion on housing and sustainable growth, one of California's hot-button issues. This discussion will focus on California's legally mandated general plans, the work of the California Department of Justice to enshrine environmental justice principles into these plans, and the importance of advocacy to prevent policies that push people, again, particularly people of color, out of incorporated areas and into unincorporated communities.

Abby: And finally, we'll end with a panel on legal barriers to improving drinking water and wastewater systems in rural unincorporated communities, and the strategies these organizations use to overcome them. Panelists will touch on the different challenges for communities on the edge of cities versus in very remote areas, and the way that advocates work with unincorporated communities to get them access to better services through creative case-by-case solutions. After this, we hope you join us at our networking happy hour at Edmonds' just across the road, generously sponsored by Beveridge and Diamond.

Jordan: Before we begin, we'd like to give a huge thank you to our symposium editor, Austin McNichols. The Symposium Director takes on responsibility for choosing a timely and important topic to be the subject of essentially one-fourth of *ELQ*'s scholarship and pulling together the logistics for an all-day event. This is no easy feat, and Austin absolutely hit it out of the park, reaching out to countless speakers and experts in preparation. Let's all give Austin another huge round of applause.

And Austin could not have done this without the help of her assistant symposium editors, Madeline Nielsen and Lauren Witt.

Abby: And finally, thank you to all the members of *ELQ* who volunteered their time and energy to run this event, and thank you to everyone in the audience who's here today. We know there are many places you could be, and we are truly grateful that you're choosing to learn with us all here today. We look forward to an amazing day, and without further ado, back to Austin.