

2025-2027

# FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE PLATFORM

TULARE COUNTY



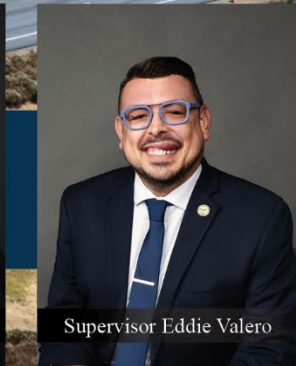
Supervisor Larry Micari



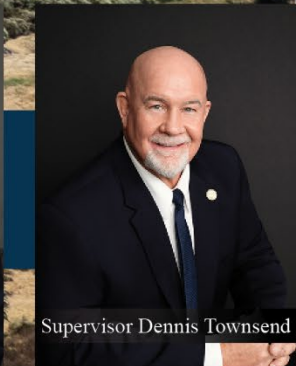
Supervisor Pete Vander Poel



Supervisor Amy Shuklian



Supervisor Eddie Valero



Supervisor Dennis Townsend

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## INTRODUCTION

The Tulare County Board of Supervisors biennially adopts a Federal Legislative Platform. The platform is a statement of priority issues for Tulare County and provides direction for County staff and for those persons advocating on behalf of the County.

The Board of Supervisors recognizes that unforeseen issues may arise as the legislative year proceeds. All requests for the Board of Supervisors to either endorse or oppose new legislation or policy must be submitted to the Board for approval. Supervisors may periodically provide letters of support or opposition for issues impacting their county Supervisorial Districts.

## TOP PRIORITIES

**Water:** The sustained availability of surface water and groundwater is crucial to the prosperity of Tulare County. Consequently, the County supports federal action that enhances access to surface water south of the delta, including expanded/restored infrastructure, and updated environmental studies and biological opinions from the Bureau of Reclamation. Reliable and secure water allocations bolster agricultural success, support job creation, build stable communities, and preserve essential infrastructure.

**Infrastructure:** Securing funding for new projects or the restoration of existing infrastructure is a top priority for the County. As one of the top three agricultural producing counties in the nation, the state of our infrastructure is of national significance. Our roads, bridges, highways, water conveyance systems, and broadband networks ensure the food nourishing this great nation and the world is grown, harvested, and transported safely and efficiently. Investing in critical infrastructure in Tulare County is an investment in national security.

**Fire Protection:** With approximately 27% of Tulare County's land area covered in natural forests, active forest management is essential for the health and safety of the county and its residents. Forest health activities, such as prescribed burning, mechanical thinning, and logging, are crucial in reducing wildfire intensity and destruction. While current law permits these practices and practices like these under specific conditions, expedited permitting and expanded eligibility are necessary to ensure projects are conducted at a scale that maximizes public benefit. All forests, including federally protected ones, require proper management.



## AGRICULTURE, NATURAL RESOURCES, & WATER

### 1. Environment and Natural Resources

#### *Challenge:*

On October 20, 2015, Governor Brown declared an emergency proclamation due to the tree mortality epidemic and requested federal support and partnership. That emergency continues today. Fuel reduction, reforestation projects, pest and diseased tree removal, and long-term protection of forested lands vulnerable to conversion are all needed to address the ongoing tree mortality epidemic. To date, 28.8 million dead or dying trees have been found statewide. Although the county has been actively conducting hazard tree removal efforts to reduce future fire risks, cut trees were left for the US Forest Service to remove. Those trees were not removed and have been left as horizontal fuel and pest habitat on the forest floor. Recent catastrophic wildfires destroyed thousands of Giant Sequoias, critical habitat, and homes, underscoring the immediate need for active forest management.

The health of our forests is of utmost concern, as wildfires have become more frequent, as have prolonged drought conditions, bark beetle infestation, the need to be able to export logs overseas, and very importantly, the protection of our National Park and Monument. Ongoing tree mortality needs to be comprehensively addressed. Tulare County wishes to partner with the Forest Service to address the many challenges in the Sequoia National Forest and Sequoia National Monument. To that end, the County executed a Master Stewardship Agreement with the US Forest Service.

#### *Solution:*

- Allow for expedited horizontal fuels removal within the Giant Sequoia Monument to protect the surrounding forest land, Giant Sequoia Groves, and the Tule River Reservation's natural and cultural resources, as well as tribal housing and infrastructure.
- Support legislation and/or funding appropriations to augment forest health activities, such as prescribed burning, mechanical thinning, timber sales, markets for biomass material, and biomass reduction in the Sequoia National Forest and Giant Sequoia National Monument.
- Support the use and expansion of Good Neighbor Authorities, Master Stewardship Agreements, and Supplemental Project Agreements to help achieve land-management goals while meeting local and rural community needs.
- Support the maximum utilization of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) exemptions for small-scale projects.
- Support infrastructure improvements within Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and the Sequoia National Monument.
- Allow and provide funding for the reestablishment of fire access/logging roads within the Sequoia National Forest and Giant Sequoia National Monument.

- Provide personnel and funding to reestablish the USFS as the lead agency for active forest management, and support ongoing communications with the USFS, especially the office of the Regional Forest Manager
- Support legislation and funding for local assistance, financial resources, regulatory relief, and outreach efforts to effectively increase avenues to mitigate and manage dead and dying trees, thereby increasing both forest and public health and safety.
- Advocate for and support legislation lifting the log export ban.
- Support additional funding for enhancing aviation resources, thereby expanding firefighting capability and surge capacity, along with overall availability of response personnel, while working with Tulare County Fire to address emergency response delays and strengthen our partnership to respond to fire and medical emergencies.
- Support legislation keeping local control over land use at the local government level, especially for communities in fire hazard areas.

## 2. Water Storage

### *Challenge:*

The Success Reservoir Enlargement Project (SREP) will increase flood protections for communities in the County of Tulare, and will maintain a stable water supply for downstream agricultural lands. The non-federal local partners appreciate the funding to complete all phases of the SREP. The project is underway, and it is imperative that the schedule continue as expeditiously as possible.

Over time, waterways and reservoirs gain silt deposits, thereby diminishing conveyance and storage capacity. To maintain capacity, dredging and other methods of sand and silt removal are crucial. Environmental challenges create roadblocks to protecting capacity by discouraging regular sand and silt removal.

### *Solution:*

- Support continued funding and hastening the Army Corps of Engineers' schedule for the Success Reservoir Enlargement Project.
- Support and help expedite permits for dredging and/or cleaning of waterways and water storage facilities during dry years to minimize water loss.



## HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

### 1. Criminal Justice Medical Care

#### *Challenge:*

Counties are required by federal law to provide medical care for inmates in the criminal justice system. A provision of federal law known as the “inmate exclusion” bans Medicaid from financing the care of inmates unless they are treated in a medical institution outside the jail facility for 24 hours or more. This means that these individuals are unable to access their federal Medicaid benefits from the moment they are booked into jail, even though the majority of these persons are in pre-trial status and presumed innocent.

Since the passage of AB 109 (Committee on Budget, 2011) requiring that some felons be incarcerated in county jails instead of state prison, the number of inmates with chronic diseases and mental health issues, along with those requiring medical care, has steeply increased by over \$8 million since FY 16/17. Moreover, acuity levels have increased, and inmates often come into the system with serious existing physical and behavioral health conditions necessitating behavioral health and/or substance abuse management and prescription medication. New and evolving state mandates, including AB 109, continue to challenge the management of medical and mental health care treatment.

This Medicaid policy is shifting the burden of cost to the counties.

Increasing flexibility in Medicaid would help counties fulfill safety-net obligations to justice-involved individuals, improve coordination of care, and decrease short-term costs to local taxpayers and long-term costs to the federal government.

#### *Solution:*

- Support legislation that expands Medicaid eligibility to allow counties to receive any available federal financial participation for medical services performed for adult and juvenile inmates that occur on the grounds of the correctional institute.
- Support legislation to ease and/or undo the federal Medicaid inmate exclusion, thereby providing Medicaid coverage for justice-involved individuals, allowing the use of Medicaid funds to pay for health care for county jail inmates.
- Support federal health care and public health funding formulas that equitably reflect the demographics, population characteristics, and health burdens of California’s Central San Joaquin Valley.
- Oppose funding reductions in Medicare, Medicaid, and other federal funding for the provision of health care.

## 2. Enhance Access to Food Benefits

### *Challenge:*

To be eligible for federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, you must meet certain requirements, including resources and income limits. Most SNAP eligibility rules apply to all households, but there are some special rules for students attending an institution of higher education. Students enrolled at least half-time, as determined by the institution of higher education, must meet SNAP income and eligibility requirements and also specific exemptions to the student rules. This often leaves those attempting to improve their earning potential with the choice between pursuing education or loss of desperately needed food benefits, which not only deprives those households (including children in many cases), but also potentially increases long-term government dependency, rather than reducing it.

### *Solution:*

- Support efforts to remove the restriction on federal SNAP eligibility for students who are otherwise eligible and who are enrolled at least half-time in a recognized school, training program, or institution of higher education.
- Support efforts to amend the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 to remove certain eligibility disqualifications that restrict otherwise eligible students from participating in the SNAP program.

## 3. Valley Fever

### *Challenge:*

Valley Fever is a serious and growing public health issue in California and other southwestern states. From 1998 to 2023, reported cases increased by 761%, with California experiencing a near tripling of cases between 2015 and 2019. Tulare County saw a rise in cases from 312 in 2017 to 508 in 2023. Current efforts to combat Valley Fever are insufficient, highlighting the need for enhanced awareness, preventive measures, and a human vaccine.

### *Solution:*

- Support legislation such as the Valley Fever Awareness and Vaccine Development and Manufacturing Act of 2024.
- Support federal funding and partnerships to enhance public health strategies that address the socioeconomic impacts of Valley Fever.



## INFRASTRUCTURE

### 1. Local Match

#### *Challenge:*

Tulare County supports continued, sustainable funding for major infrastructure projects, including rural projects, through a combination of new federal funding, non-federal funding, and newly prioritized and expedited projects. This will require agreements on potentially creating funding mechanisms to supplement declining receipts to the Highway Trust Fund. Critical to Tulare County and other self-help counties will be the treatment of local sales tax measures dedicated to transportation improvements.

#### *Solution:*

- Legislation has passed, and as implementation and rulemaking are developed, local match should be taken into consideration when prioritizing project funding.

### 2. Definition of Rural

#### *Challenge:*

A major challenge for counties with large rural areas is securing funding for implementation of necessary infrastructure projects. Previous infrastructure proposals placed emphasis on supporting rural areas. However, despite Tulare County's geography and obvious rural character, the existence of a metropolitan area could make the County ineligible for certain federal programs and funding. The definition of "rural" will determine the County's ability to invest in projects addressing safety and improved mobility in key economic sectors, including agricultural production.

#### *Solution:*

- Designations or definitions of "rural" in infrastructure legislation and funding allocations must include rural portions of counties that have urban areas by carving out the metropolitan areas and classifying the remaining section as rural.

### 3. Broadband

#### *Challenge:*

According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), broadband is unavailable to approximately 24 million Americans or 7% percent of the population. Twenty-eight percent of Americans living in rural



communities, lack access. Over time, various forms of legislation have been proposed to bring all federal and state broadband programs to the current definition of what the FCC defines as high-speed internet. The goal is to ensure that all communities receiving broadband support have access to internet services that are at current broadband speeds.

*Solution:*

- Support federal financial participation in local community technology advancements.
- Support enhancing broadband service to rural communities.

#### **4. Farm to Market**

*Challenge:*

The dairy industry plays a major part in the economy of Tulare County and provides five percent (5%) of all milk consumed in the United States. Hundreds of gallons of milk are produced every day from each of the approximately 292 dairies in Tulare County. This milk is transported to processing facilities by truck over county roads. According to Caltrans, a fully loaded dairy truck can weigh up to 80,000 pounds. Roadways carrying 500 trucks per day would be impacted as if 5 million passenger cars had traveled that same road. The Tulare County Association of Governments has developed a farm-to-market strategy for road repair and improvement prioritization that can be duplicated or used as a basis for a new program.

*Solution:*

- Provide special funding for roads with over 500 truck trips per day for farm-to-market shipping through a set-aside funding mechanism as part of an infrastructure bill, including the transportation reauthorization bill.

#### **5. Secure Rural School (SRS)**

*Challenge:*

The Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program provides assistance to rural counties and school districts affected by the decline in revenue from timber harvests on federal lands. Historically, rural communities and schools have relied on a share of receipts from timber harvests to supplement local funding for education services, search and rescue missions, and fire prevention programs. In FY 2023, Tulare County was allocated \$ 467,103.51 in funding. Nationally, \$232 million in SRS funding benefits to 745 counties in 41 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Congress reauthorized Secure Rural School payments for fiscal years 2021-23; however, failure to reauthorize this long-standing federal obligation to forest counties beyond FY 23 could lead to dramatic budgetary shortfalls for counties across the country. The last time authorization for SRS lapsed in FY 2016, federal forest payments to counties decreased by over 80 percent on average.

*Solution:*

- Congress needs to enact a long-term legislative solution for continued revenue-sharing payments to forest counties through the US Forest Service's Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program.
- Support the creation of an endowment fund to provide stable and reliable funding for County services.

**6. Subsidence***Challenge:*

Subsidence along the Friant-Kern Canal is a result of increased groundwater pumping from about 2012 to 2016. The groundwater pumping came in response to reduced and curtailed surface water deliveries by the Bureau of Reclamation during that period. Canal capacity is now about 1,750 cubic feet per second, down from a designed capacity of 4,000 cfs. Long-term repairs to the canal system could cost upwards of \$350 million in the coming years. The repairs include bridge work in partnership with Tulare County.

Local Groundwater Sustainability Agencies are addressing overdraft with the implementation of Groundwater Sustainability Plans. Tulare County and various water agencies continue to pursue much larger releases south of the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta; however, rehabilitation and reconstruction have been somewhat overlooked as an integral part of the project from a planning and funding perspective.

*Solution:*

- Support legislation and continued appropriations to address the issue of subsidence along the Friant-Kern Canal, including the planning and funding for five Tulare County bridges.

**7. Dry Wells***Challenge:*

There are inadequate funding sources to address and implement permanent solutions to increasingly frequent water shortages. For example, the USDA Household Water Well System (HWWS) has a cap of \$15,000 per household, whereas the cost of new wells in Tulare County now averages 400% of this amount.

*Solution:*

- Support additional funding for permanent solutions to water shortage issues.
- Raise per-household funding limits to account for current market rates.
- Increase maximum grantee awards to enable grantees to serve a greater portion of the population in need.

## 8. Workforce Investment

### *Challenge:*

Due to an irregular federal budget process in Washington D.C., the workforce development system is unable to plan effectively for the future and provide the highest level of services to jobseekers and businesses. Federal funding in through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and associated Department of Labor programs has fallen over the last decade causing the workforce system to be stressed to the point of breaking should this trend continue.

Our nation's workforce development system needs reauthorization and reform that retains and returns decision making power and flexibility to the local workforce boards that are closest to the communities they serve, rather than state agencies and other bureaucratic entities. The WIOA reauthorization bill needs to have realistic and simplified administrative requirements, local control of budgeting, and a commitment to increased funding for a system that has been strained with too many responsibilities and lacking the resources needed to address the multitude of tasks it is assigned through legislation.

This reauthorization and funding increase is necessary to allow for services aimed at helping the millions of Americans who need assistance navigating a changing and evolving economy so that they may provide for themselves and their families in realizing the American Dream of self-sufficiency, home ownership, and their pursuits of happiness.

### *Solution:*

- Support policies and budget actions that lead to stable, long-term funding for workforce development, and oppose action that reduces funding for workforce development.
- Streamline reporting and administrative requirements such that local boards can focus on delivering services rather than being tied up in administrative responsibilities.

## 9. Libraries

### *Challenge:*

Access to library and literacy services and resources, including the internet, is critical to our community members, including vulnerable populations, for services (many that are primarily available online) including literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, access to government sites, employment services, educational assistance and resources, and bill payment sites.

The Federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) provides funding for California public libraries from the federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), administered by the California State Library. LSTA is needed to ensure funds are available to assist the County Library in providing library services and resources. The Library benefited over the years from programs and grants funded by LSTA, including eBooks, sustainability programs, staff education, digitization of historic collections, and online resources.

Additionally, through the Universal Service Schools and Libraries E-Rate Program, our County libraries receive up to a 90% discount and one-time grants, thereby allowing the Library access to high-speed broadband, including WiFi, at 17 branch library locations.

*Solution:*

- Support continued reauthorization of the LSTA and E-Rate Programs.



## GENERAL GOVERNMENT

### 1. Discretionary Funding

#### *Challenge:*

Discretionary spending is a significant component of the U.S. federal budget, with non-defense discretionary spending totaled approximately \$1.7 trillion, with \$910 billion allocated to non-defense programs, including education, transportation, health, social services. In FY24, the federal budget saw significant discussions around maintaining funding levels. The Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) of 2023 set discretionary spending caps for FY24 and FY25, limiting defense spending to \$849.78 billion and non-defense spending to \$736.45 billion for each year. These limits represent a reduction compared to prior projections, aiming to address federal deficit concerns.

A Continuing Resolution (CR) enacted for FY24 extended funding temporarily, allowing Congress more time to negotiate comprehensive appropriations bills. Key programs for Tulare County, including Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and various USDA initiatives, depend on stable funding levels. Future discretionary spending agreements will be crucial in ensuring continued support for these services.

#### *Solution:*

- Support continued discretionary funding for federal programs that sustain services for Tulare County communities, industries, and residents.

### 2. Payment in Lieu of Taxes

#### *Challenge:*

Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) are federal payments to local governments that help offset losses in property taxes due to nontaxable federal lands within their boundaries. California received \$64.3 million in PILT payments based on 43,729,925 acres of federal land in 57 out of 58 counties. The federal government owns and manages approximately 50 percent of lands within Tulare County. Tulare County received \$4,251,368 in 2024 for 1,530,762 total acres. The FY24 government-funding bill provided for full PILT payments. The Department of Interior usually releases those figures before the summer.

#### *Solution:*

- Provide for long-term reauthorization and continued full funding for the PILT program.

### 3. State Criminal Alien Assistance Program

#### *Challenge:*

The Bureau of Justice Assistance, US Department of Justice, administers the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program (SCAAP) in conjunction with the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security (DHS). SCAAP provides a key source of federal justice funding to states and localities that incurred correctional officer salary costs for incarcerating undocumented criminal aliens with at least one felony or two misdemeanor convictions for violations of state or local law and incarcerated them for at least 4 consecutive days during the reporting period. SCAAP funding has decreased 75% from its fully authorized level of \$950 million. The enacted FY24 funding level for SCAAP is \$234 million, which represents a continued cost shift to the County.

#### **Solution:**

- Support continued protection and enhancement of SCAAP funding.

### 4. Trade

#### *Challenge:*

In 2022, California's farms and ranches received \$59 billion in cash receipts for their output and lead the country in agricultural exports, with 40% of the commodities produced entering the global market, at a value of over \$23.6 billion dollars in 2022. California produces over 99% of the almonds, artichokes, dates, dried plums, figs, garlic, kiwifruit, olives, olive oil, pistachios, prunes, raisins, table grapes, tomatoes for processing, and walnuts that are exported from the United States.

Agriculture is a major economic driver in California and has a strong presence statewide, taking full advantage of the microclimates that are unique to our state. Good relationships with other countries are particularly important to small agricultural communities throughout the state that rely on agricultural exports to sustain the local economy.

#### *Solution:*

- Support fair trade agreements that address labor and high-quality imports as well as overly strict rules for exports.

### 5. Cannabis/Marijuana Enforcement

#### *Challenge:*

With the implementation of California's Proposition 215 (Compassionate Use Act) and Proposition 64 (Control, Regulate, and Tax Adult Use of Marijuana Act), illegal cannabis cultivations and marijuana black market sales have flourished within Tulare County. In 2022, detectives with the Marijuana Investigation Team served over 102 marijuana search warrants, resulting in the eradication of 46,963 cannabis plants

from 70 outdoor grow sites on public and private lands and 15 indoor grow sites. In addition to the 46,963 plants eradicated, approximately 8,473 pounds of processed/packaged marijuana was seized. Approximately \$665,971.00 in US currency was seized and approximately 44 suspects were arrested related to the illegal grow sites.

The current trend of illegal cannabis cultivations in Tulare County has moved from primarily public land grow sites to privately owned properties in the foothills and valley floor, as Mexican cartels and other drug-trafficking organizations (DTO) have found it more profitable to buy, rent, or trespass on valley floor properties for the sole use of illegal cannabis cultivation.

Using greenhouses, DTOs are able cultivate cannabis on a yearly basis with five to six harvests annually. Newer cannabis strains produce marijuana flowers (slang term: "bud") in as little as 60 days. Instead of large grow sites easily observed during overflights, DTOs are switching to smaller, backyard style greenhouses and spreading them out in smaller, rural communities. By no means does this lessen the environmental impact on the land, as the organizations continue to contaminate groundwater with illegal chemicals and fertilizers along with depleting groundwater supplies for local rural communities. Multiple irrigation districts are impacted by lower water tables due to cannabis grow sites.

Further, workers, mainly Mexican nationals (due to the limited information the workers can give when contacted) are exploited and human trafficking is common. Most often, workers live at grow sites in tents with makeshift kitchens and no toileting areas, they are often paid less than offered. Trash, human waste, unlawfully stored chemicals, and dead animals from illegal poisons used to protect the cannabis plants are common at grow sites.

*Solution:*

- Advocate for increased and continual funding for local eradication measures and outreach efforts to mitigate and manage the proliferation of illegal cannabis cultivation in Tulare County.