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Newsom Vetoes Protections for Tribal Sacred Sites and Water Rights

Five days after apologizing to California Tribes, Newsom vetoes the California Indian Freedom Act and the Indigenous Water Rights Act, show the Governor's apology was words without action

Sacramento, CA - Yesterday, Governor Gavin Newsom vetoed the California Indian Freedom Act (AB1881) and Water Policy for California Native American Tribes (AB2218). Both bills aimed to expand protections for California Tribal cultures, religion, land, water, and sovereignty.

"As a California Yurok and Karuk tribal person, I should not have to wonder whether a future change in state leadership or agency policy could prevent me and my family from accessing our religious and cultural sites that we have been maintaining since time immemorial. If the governor believes these protections create uncertainty, despite bipartisan support, he should at least have the decency to tell us exactly what he wants to see for us to have these basic protections." - Brook Thompson, Interim Executive Director of Save California Salmon

The lands and waters at the center of both bills were not ceded by California Tribes. They were taken. The rivers that have sustained Tribal communities for thousands of years have been dammed, diverted, and mined, and the sacred places along them placed under state and private control without Tribal consent. Despite all of this, Tribes have never stopped caring for these places, and their knowledge of how to steward them is older and deeper than any state agency's. AB 1881 and AB 2218 would have expanded tribal partnership and stewardship to protect the landscapes tribes have depended on since time immemorial.

Tribal Beneficial Uses do not by themselves resolve inequalities embedded in California's water management and grant systems. California's contemporary water system was developed through laws and institutions that largely excluded its Indigenous Peoples. Addressing historic inequality requires more than the Department of Water Resources incorporating tribal voices in existing processes; the state must examine whether its policies, funding structures, and decision-making systems provide equitable opportunities for Tribal governments and peoples.

"The intent of both bills was to move the state towards meaningful reconciliation with California Tribes. Newsom acknowledges the state's historical violence against California's Indigenous People, but when given the chance to rectify those harms and finalize the bills, which had overwhelming bipartisan support, he disappointed us and failed to follow through. The ability to freely practice our traditional religions and resolving the inequities within the state's water regulation system are important issues that we will continue to advocate for in the next administration." Kasil Willie, Policy Director, Save California Salmon

Gov. Newsom's concerns about California's urgent need to secure its water future are valid, that future includes tribal people who are Californians too. There is no water future for the state of California without meaningful inclusion of the original stewards of this land and waterways. Vetoing these two bills, if anything, slows the ability of Californians to find a meaningful path forward to an equitable and secure water future, even as we still fight for our basic American rights to religion and participation.

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