

Director Eraina Ortega, CalHR,

My name is Cory Copeland. I am an environmental scientist who works for small, but important regional planning agency named the Delta Stewardship Council. We're responsible for writing the Delta Plan which is a long-term planning and regulatory document for California's Sacramento and San Joaquin River Delta that connects to the San Francisco Bay. In our role, we support water supply for about 20 million people, manage one of the largest estuary habitats on the continent, support flood control that protects tens of billions of dollars' worth of property and economic activity, and support regional economic and community vitality. Our mission is extremely important (provided you agree that Californians want drinking water and healthy ecosystems). This mission is only accomplished because of the work done by State scientists.

Thankfully, the administration in Sacramento is very supportive of science and especially scientists. I've spoken to Wade Crowfoot, Director of the Natural Resource Agency, and saw he wrote a letter where he acknowledged that his agency's ability to accomplish their mission is jeopardized by the dreadful of remuneration state scientists receive. Similarly, I saw the director of Cal EPA and other leaders in the State have written to you asking CalHR to address this problem.

As I've tracked the bargaining between the California Association of Professional Scientists (CAPS) and Cal HR throughout this process, I have been surprised to read that CalHR still does not acknowledge that a pay parity problem exists. Shocking given that three separate pay parity problems exist and they each cause significant problems. First, State scientists are paid less than our engineer colleagues who perform similar work. Second, supervising scientists make dramatically more than rank and file employees. Third, State scientists make comically¹ small amounts compared to colleagues in the private sector, local government, and federal government.

I'll speak to the pay parity issue between scientists and engineers first. The work I do isn't substantially different than the engineers at my agency. For example, I will describe two job duties performed at my agency to you and you can guess which is an engineer and which is a scientist. Person A analyzes levees and other flood control infrastructure and runs hydrologic models to test the resiliency of that flood infrastructure to climate change. Person B takes data from urban water systems and aggregates them to show if investments in water infrastructure are consistent with State targets for water supply performance. So which person deserved to be paid more? Person A or Person B? Can you even tell which is the scientist? Seriously, pause right now and write down which you think is the engineer and which is the scientist to see if you can really tell the difference. I'll circle back to it.

The second parity problem we have is that supervisors make a lot more than rank and file staff. This is a problem in a few ways. I have heard scientists express that they would rather not become supervisors or do not believe they would be good at it, but the financial consequence of remaining a working scientist is too great to avoid it. This is because the pay disparity is so significant. So many scientists, many of whom are utterly brilliant subject matter experts, leave roles they love to pursue jobs in middle management that they hate because they can't afford not to.

¹ I say comically because I once told someone how much I'm paid and they literally laughed at me and told me I should move to India where I'd make more. They thought it was comical! Or at least they did until I told them one of the people in charge of their region's drinking water quality has to drive Lyft as a side gig. It's a lot less funny when a slip up by an overworked State employee could result in your baby turning blue.

Lastly, the result of the State's poor competitive salaries is that I have completely failed to recruit scientists to my agency from my graduate school or even from the fellows (basically fancy interns) we bring in. The ones who want to stay at the State are often smart enough to pursue jobs in classifications that pay more (e.g. the air quality classifications) or just go work for literally anyone else. Shouldn't California be worried that a well-educated environmental scientist can get paid more by counties, cities, the federal government, and obviously private firms. I literally had someone send me a job opportunity at a non-profit that I qualify for this week that would pay more than I make at the State. I've recently applied for jobs I don't think will be as interesting or important to society as the job I do now just because I can't justify not at least considering work that pays me 170% more and offers similar benefits.

So what does this all add up to? In my opinion, it suggests the interests of the State of California and the interests of the scientists are in alignment right now. Scientists work to protect the California as it is experiencing unprecedented threats from climate change and legacy environmental degradation that have resulted in droughts, wildfires, floods, and endangered species at the brink. Any Californian whose opinion is worth considering understands these issues are going to be some of the greatest challenges California will face in the decades to come. Heck they're arguably the second² great issues we're facing right now. We can't rest on our laurels, even wrapping our head around how quickly the risks to our resources are changing from climate change is a dramatic scientific endeavor. The appointees at the head of resources agencies understand this and the governor does too. These problems cannot be addressed with bargain-bin science. CAPS is not even asking for you to pay us enough to make State science jobs in California the most desirable in the region. We just want to compete for talent for once so that we can accomplish the necessary missions our agencies fulfill.

So, CalHR has a reputation (unfairly, I hope!) for being sad little bean counters who see their role as little more than bureaucratic obstacles focused on reducing budgetary cost in the short-term regardless of the costs to the functioning of essential state services. I don't think that's who you are. I think you also understand the urgent needs we're facing and the administrations priorities. If I am correct, then we do in fact have an interest alignment here. It's patently obvious to the people working in these roles and the leadership managing them that poor remuneration is costing the State. CalHR can fix this and the cost of it will be darn cheap for the State especially compared to the cost of failing to appropriately adapt to climate change because we're churning through scientists and not recruiting the best talent.

Thanks for hearing me out and I really do hope I am right that CalHR really does see itself as partner in ensuring the State can survive the 21st century resource challenges we'll face from climate change. The most important start would be to ensure we're prepared and staffed with scientific subject matter experts.

Good luck bargaining,

Cory Copeland
Environmental Scientist
Delta Stewardship Council

P.S. Which person did you think was the engineer Person A or Person B? Either way you were wrong. Both of those people are me.

² Covid is still pretty bad, get vaccinated, dear reader, if you haven't already and I hope you and yours stay healthy.