

Wage Discrimination Is Illegal and Real for California's State Scientists, Governor Newsom Needs To Stop It Now

As Covid-19 drags on, droughts persist, and wildfires loom, and more than one million Californians lack access to safe and affordable water, many state agencies are struggling to recruit and retain scientists, the same professionals Governor Gavin Newsom relies on to keep the state safe. The governor is undermining his own promise – that the West Coast is and will continue to be guided by science. Sadly, his scientists are pursuing employment elsewhere because they are underappreciated and woefully under compensated compared with environmental engineers, geologists and other technical staff.

This has been an issue since 2005, when the Schwarzenegger administration increased environmental engineer salaries substantially to maintain a competitive balance, yet failed to give state scientists equitable consideration. As a result, environmental engineers currently earn up to 50 percent more than scientists for performing the same or very similar work – leading to a California scientific brain drain.

In 2014 salaries for supervising scientists and managers were adjusted after a court decision concluded that scientists and engineers were performing “similar and comparable work” and must be paid the same. The court’s decision was based on California government code 19826 that applies to all public employees, yet salaries for staff-level employees have yet to be adjusted, effectively resulting in the State being out of compliance with its own wage laws and policies.

The State’s inability to recruit and retain scientists has become so acute that many agencies are seeing new employees leave after a just few years of training, ultimately departing for better wages and working conditions elsewhere. In a recent survey of CalEPA scientists, over 90% of respondents indicated that low wages curtailed their willingness to recruit other scientists to work for the state. All of which ignores a simple truth: The trend of scientists – who safeguard communities, resources, products, food and climate – to abandon state service for more equitable opportunities compromises California’s standing as the world’s leader in addressing climate change and the myriad environmental challenges confronting both our state and our country.

In his first speech after taking office, Governor Newsom said, “it’s never the wrong time to do the right thing”. Yet how many more years must scientists - a majority of whom are women - remain underpaid? How long can the governor claim to put “science first,” when in the midst of unprecedented environmental challenges, he fails to recognize the role that committed, frontline scientists play? How long until he finally connects the dots – that to be guided by science, you must first have the scientists – and stops the hemorrhaging of his scientific workforce and offers fair and competitive salaries?

We understand there is a financial cost to addressing this pay inequity, but we also recognize the costs to our scientific agencies when they are unable to complete their missions; and the very real and tangible impacts that has on all Californians. Even the Governor’s own Environmental Agency Secretaries have spoken up on the pay issue and have put their demands in writing, but to date, their voices have also been ignored.

Scientists are vitally important to ensuring California's diverse ecosystems and economy thrive. We urge Governor Newsom to resolve the scientists pay issue so California can attract and retain the scientific talent it requires. Science is an intimate and essential partner in California's future. But we need to believe that, in Governor Newsom's administration, science is a priority, and that we have a voice, a presence, and are genuinely valued as state scientists.

Sincerely,

The Scientists of the State of California