

Questions for Candidates and Elected Officials

Tom Lackey, Republican candidate for State Assembly, 36th District

1. Nearly a quarter of Kern’s population (24.4%) is at or below the federal poverty level, according to the California Poverty Measure, but ranks 23 in terms of eligible residents’ utilization of CalFresh- an estimated loss of \$73.6 Million in federal nutrition benefits. What policies would you support to boost participation among the currently eligible population for a program that has a \$1.79 economic multiplier for every \$1 spent?

Our communities within Kern County are unique when compared to regions throughout California. We have learned that the CalFresh program isn’t as effective as it should be, as it needs to be, when it comes to Kern County. ‘One-Size-Fits-All’ programs that are designed for residents throughout the state do not necessarily fit our region. Our poverty levels in Kern are disturbing and are one of the highest in California. Rather than promoting the CalFresh program even more in the community, as Assemblyman, I would support legislation that would customize a program to meet the specific needs of our specific region. We need to ensure that we aren’t losing out on taxpayer dollars that should be coming back to our region.

2. California’s current three-year drought is the worst in at least 100 years. Consequently, 428,000 acres have been fallowed, and over 17,000 jobs lost. What policies would you propose to build on-farm resilience in the face of climate change and a more sustainable use of Kern’s water?

Our local farming industry is one of the hardest industries hit in the nation. The impacts our community has seen because of our drought is unbelievable; thousands of jobs lost and numerous local farmers struggling to keep their business afloat. When we look at farming resilience, we immediately recognize that policymakers have a responsibility to the industry and Californians to build on-farm resilience. In just the past decade, we have seen youth programs that educate our children on farming be forced to end programming because of the lack of funding. Our state chapter of Future Farmers of America has seen a tremendous decrease in membership and support by school districts.

Far too often, policymakers author and pass legislation that impacts our communities without a clear understanding of the effects overall. If elected, I will look to experts and those experienced in our communities on how we could propose legislation to support the industry, enhance on-farm resilience and promote sustainable and efficient use of Kern’s dwindling water supply. I will meet with the organizations such as the Kern Food Policy Council and ask for their thoughts on how the state could be supportive, rather than pass more restrictions that make it even more difficult for our businesses to support their families.

3. We estimate that 17.2% of the California's workforce is in the food system, including production, processing, distribution, retail, and service industries. According to the KEDC, nearly a quarter (24%) of Kern's private sector jobs are food system-related, yet many of the workers are undervalued and are more likely to experience substandard working conditions. What labor issues in the food chain are you most concerned with, and how would you address them?

Employee safety is critical. Regardless of the industry, employee safety is an important and often overlooked factor that affects both product costs and, most importantly, working conditions. Kern is a hub for food related jobs. Our community offers thousands of jobs and the people that are looking to fill those positions are endless. However, if we do not emphasize safety, we will see folks no longer interested in being employed in region and it will begin create a snowball effect as people leave the region. My philosophy is that elected officials have to be proactive on critical issues such as this and have the responsibility to go to constituents and create opportunities for their voices to be heard. I would schedule town hall meetings on a regular basis where those in the industry can share their concerns and come to a consensus on how together we could address the issues.

4. The Kern Food Policy Council is pursuing the creation of a comprehensive, county-wide food system assessment that will help us create new relationships between policy and action, as well as explore the potential for community-based pilot projects directly addressing the physical and economic health and well-being of Kern County residents. In what ways, if any, would you support this effort?

First, thank you to those who have risen to occasion to make sure these issues are addressed. Kern is unique community because of folks such as you who create partnerships to benefit the community. As your Assemblyman, I would not only make myself available by sitting at the table and adding my voice to the discussion but I would also market the program throughout the state. This is a program that can be a model for other regions in both the state and country facing similar challenges. Based on recommendations provided by the membership, I would consider authoring legislation that will support pilot projects to address the well being of our county and its residents.