
How California's coastal-rural divide could provide lessons for the nation

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How California's coastal-rural divide could provide lessons for the nation

By Mackenzie Mays

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SACRAMENTO — When California emerges from its coronavirus lockdown, the state's often overlooked rural counties could take the lead rather than the nationally trendsetting San Francisco Bay Area.

Rural counties house roughly one-tenth of California's nearly 40 million residents but comprise more than half its land mass. A greater share of inland residents have continued to work in essential sectors under social isolation orders, and many believe their thinly populated communities are less vulnerable to Covid-19 spread and shouldn't be held back by coastal cities. A distrust of Sacramento directives and a government helmed by liberal Gov. Gavin Newsom are also at play.

California's divide could become a harbinger for how rural and coastal states ease their restrictions in different ways. [Escalating frustration](#) among conservatives over stay-at-home-orders' impacts on the economy has led to protests across the country, and similar demonstrations have been organized in pockets of California.

President Donald Trump has given governors latitude over stay-at-home orders, and Newsom likewise says counties will have significant discretion over how they reopen. But in a public health crisis, beloved local policymaking could pose a problem for both Trump and Newsom and risk a more confusing crisis without a central plan — potentially leading to counteractive surges that start in small hamlets rather than major metro areas.

Those differences will become clearer as California communities decide to reopen at different paces, using Trump's tweets as leverage. The president posted on Friday to "LIBERATE" Michigan, Minnesota and Virginia despite health experts urging more caution. Placerville, a Republican-led city an hour east of the state Capitol, is already asking for stay-at-home orders to be lifted there.

If rural counties open before densely populated coastal cities, health officials will watch closely to see whether different social distancing rules can coexist in the same state — and what health effects an isolated reopening would have locally and beyond.

Despite growing pressure to reopen, health officials worry about a [lack of sufficient testing in rural communities](#) — and the potential for [disproportionate suffering](#) due to socioeconomic barriers and health care shortages they faced pre-pandemic.

In rural Tulare County, one of California's last Republican bastions, Supervisor Pete Vander Poel expects a "strong push" from the agricultural center to reopen as soon as possible.

"We are not a highly concentrated urban area," he said. "I believe that our businesses feel like they can accommodate social distancing and increase hygiene and sanitation much quicker and on a much more open basis."

But Newsom used Tulare County as an example of how rural areas are not protected from the virus, pointing to more than 300 cases there, mostly due to outbreaks in nursing homes.

"For those that think this is just an urban construct, or densified in certain parts of the state, it exists and persists, Covid-19, throughout the state, including rural California," Newsom said Saturday. "None of us are immune from this disease, and if we stop taking it seriously, we will have serious consequences."

California's regions have already experienced the coronavirus pandemic in different ways. As wealthy tech workers in Silicon Valley seamlessly transitioned into remote work, farm workers and others in the Central Valley's essential industries still reported to their jobs.

Only one public school in the most populous state remains open — in Tulare County, which is represented by Rep. [Devin Nunes](#), who has railed against Newsom's stay-at-home order and called the governor's recommendation to close schools for the rest of the academic year "way overkill."

A handful of rural counties have still reported no cases, or only one case, while Los Angeles County has soared past the 10,000 mark, according to [the California Department of Public Health](#).

California's vast diversity, usually heralded by Newsom, could make a smooth reopening much harder than in smaller, more homogeneous states. As some counties open, others may resist, saying their infection rate and denser living necessitate a longer lockdown.

Affluent counties with a high share of remote-working professionals may decide they can function longer without easing restrictions. Lower-income counties stretched thin may determine that resuming activities is necessary for economic sustenance, even if infection risks remain. Residents under lockdown may resent that fellow Californians elsewhere are opening up and encourage their leaders to prevent outside travelers, as some have already done in popular Sierra Nevada vacation spots.

"If the curve is going to flatten, counties are going to bear that. ... That means the curve is going to differ because California is not a state, it's really a nation of five or six different states," said David McCuan, a political science professor at Sonoma State. "Counties that don't touch water in California are very different than what people think of when they think of California. They are pink or purple counties if not outright Trump counties."

The Rural County Representatives of California includes 37 of the state's 58 counties. Paul Smith, a senior vice president at RCRC, said those counties are adhering to Newsom's orders but that "it's a completely different world" where not much has changed since the pandemic hit.

"You can drive through parts of these counties and it may take you 30 minutes before you see another person on the road," he said. "The elected officials in these counties are taking this very seriously but they are not sensational about it because to them, if you already live two miles apart from each other, you're socially distancing just by the nature of the place."

While rural counties are generally faring well during the coronavirus crisis in comparison to metropolitan hubs, they would suffer worse than cities in a rapid outbreak, Smith said, pointing to the lack of health care facilities capable of handling serious cases. That means leaders there need to take the coronavirus seriously even if they are confident about their infection curves.

"For our most rural areas, they're really, really lagging in cases of admittances and deaths, and we hope it stays that way," Smith said. "It would wipe these communities out."

Fresno County Health Officer Dr. Rais Vohra said the best path would be allowing the Central Valley and other regions to move forward on their own — but it will not be easy.

"I think that the reopening, whenever and however that happens, may actually be more chaotic than the shutting down. And I say that because I do feel, and I have heard, different levels of energy and different voices talking about reopening on different trajectories," Vohra said. "We're going to have to get that coordinated extremely well in order to do it right."

Newsom has laid out [a gradual plan](#) with public health benchmarks the state must meet before reopening, but he also said this week that "localism is determinative." Newsom's March 19 [stay-at-home order](#) forced rural counties to join their urban counterparts in social isolation, but it is not clear how much latitude he would give counties if they want to move faster than coastal leaders.

"Because of the scale and scope of California, because of the geographic distances, because of the rural and urban construct, because of density of populations and also density of spread being so distinct and unique in different parts of the state, yes, we'll be guided by local decision making," Newsom said. "But there will be baseline recommendations and guidance that will come out that will create the foundation and the floor of expectation."

While Newsom and Trump have exchanged rare accolades for each other's handling of the pandemic, party lines still divide parts of California.

Mike Madrid, a GOP strategist critical of Trump's brand of politics, said a sector of California conservatives has complained about government overreach during the crisis while sheltering in place from "the safety of their homes," and have politicized public health advice.

"Anti-government rhetoric in the conservative movement has gone from being anti-government to anti-experts, whether they're medical doctors or public health officials. You saw it in the vaccine movement here in California: anti-vaccine, anti-science," Madrid said. "Unfortunately, even when people's lives are in jeopardy, people are still refusing to recognize the

obvious, and that's just the nature of our politics now and years of training based on what confirmation bias you ascribe to."

Nowhere better exemplifies the state's coronavirus disconnect than the Fresno area. The state's fifth largest city issued a stay-home order a day ahead of the statewide lockdown — a move that Nunes, who represents parts of Fresno, called "controversial" in an email to constituents.

Fresno County, which includes the rural expanses outside the city, made clear it wasn't on the same page, saying its leaders encouraged voluntary social distancing and effective hygiene instead.

Fresno City Councilman Miguel Arias said "it's like a civil war" fighting with local officials who represent the more rural parts of the county on how to move forward in response to the pandemic. Arias, a Democrat, said he worries the longer officials resist, the more people will suffer. He pointed to the Valley's poor air quality, health care provider shortage and high rate of underlying conditions like asthma and diabetes.

"They've chosen a wait and see approach that has been pushed by a few in Republican leadership, framing the directives from Sacramento as government overreach and overreaction," Arias said. "Some have spent more of their time protecting the livelihoods of certain businesses at the expense of the lives of our most vulnerable. They will have a lot more deaths that they will have to own."

Fresno County Supervisor Buddy Mendes, a Republican, rebuffed Arias' views and said the idea that political beliefs have driven some coronavirus policies is "horse shit." Fresno County is taking it seriously, Mendes said, but the gap is one of geography — not politics.

"If you're in a metropolitan area ... you have to take things differently than if you're in Mono County or Mariposa County or some place like that," Mendes said. "It works differently in the country than it does in a metropolitan area. Everybody is still working here."

Katy Murphy and Colby Bermel contributed to this report.

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