

APPENDIX A. DEFINITIONS OF PRIORITY POPULATIONS

This appendix provides guidance to agencies administering California Climate Investments programs funded through the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) on applying designations of disadvantaged communities and low-income communities and households to program design and implementation.

In October 2021, the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) released CalEnviroScreen 4.0, an updated version of the screening tool that the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) has historically used to identify disadvantaged communities. CalEPA then updated its disadvantaged communities designation in May 2022 based on CalEnviroScreen 4.0. In addition, as specified in the Funding Guidelines, the California Air Resource Board (CARB) has updated the reference year(s) used to identify low-income communities and households in response to CalEPA's updated disadvantaged community designation.

There may be limited cases where this guidance requires additional clarification for individual programs. In these cases, programs should work directly with CARB to determine the most appropriate method.

Disadvantaged communities

State law, as provided by Senate Bill (SB) 535 and amended by Assembly Bill (AB) 1550, directs the Secretary for Environmental Protection at CalEPA to identify "disadvantaged communities." Identification must be based on geographic, socioeconomic, public health, and environmental hazard criteria. The criteria may include, but are not limited to:

- Areas disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and other hazards that can lead to negative public health effects, exposure, or environmental degradation.
- Areas with concentrations of people that are of low-income, high unemployment, low levels of homeownership, high rent burden, sensitive populations, or low levels of educational attainment.

To meet the statutory mandate, CalEPA uses a tool called CalEnviroScreen to help identify disadvantaged communities for the purpose of priority population investments. OEHHA developed this screening tool under CalEPA's guidance to assess areas that are disproportionately affected by multiple types of pollution and areas with vulnerable populations.

CalEnviroScreen includes numerous indicators in two broad categories: "Pollution Burden," which includes exposures and environmental effects, and "Population Characteristics," which includes sensitive populations and socioeconomic factors. The indicator scores are combined for each census tract to determine an overall CalEnviroScreen score. The higher the score, the higher the level of cumulative burden according to these indicators.

In October 2021, OEHHA released CalEnviroScreen version 4.0 based on 21 indicators that were evaluated at the census tract scale. In May 2022, using CalEnviroScreen 4.0 and the American Indian Areas Related National Geo-database, CalEPA identified the list of disadvantaged community census tracts and land areas for the purpose of implementing California Climate Investments under SB 535 and AB 1550. Under the new designation, the identified disadvantaged communities include:

- The census tracts with the highest 25 percent of overall scores in the State based on CalEnviroScreen 4.0;
- Census tracts lacking overall scores in CalEnviroScreen 4.0 due to data gaps but receiving the highest five percent of scores on a composite score measuring cumulative pollution burden;
- Census tracts identified in the 2017 SB 535 disadvantaged communities designation as disadvantaged, regardless of their scores in CalEnviroScreen 4.0; and
- Lands under the control of federally recognized tribes.

CalEPA is providing a consultation-based process for any interested federally recognized tribe to identify land under its control that is not accounted for in the American Indian Areas Related National Geo-database. Administering agencies receiving questions from federally recognized tribes on the potential inclusion of new areas in the designation of disadvantaged communities should direct tribes to the CalEPA office of the Deputy Secretary for Environmental Justice, Tribal Affairs, and Border Relations via [the Tribal Affairs contact](#). CARB will provide guidance to administering agencies on claiming priority population benefits for any lands that CalEPA adds to the disadvantaged communities designation based on consultation with federally recognized tribes.

Please note that CalEnviroScreen is a screening tool that informs the identification of disadvantaged communities based on currently available data. As community characteristics change over time and the tool is updated, CalEPA will periodically review and update its SB 535 designation of disadvantaged communities.

As CalEPA updates the list of census tracts identified as disadvantaged communities over time, CARB will issue supplemental guidance to the Funding Guidelines to provide direction to agencies on the applicability of new designations.

Low-income communities

AB 1550 defines “low-income communities” as those census tracts with: 1) median household incomes at or below 80 percent of the statewide median income, or 2) median household incomes at or below the threshold designated as low-income by the Department of Housing and Community Development’s State Income Limits (HCD State Income Limits).²³ Census tracts that satisfy either of these definitions were identified as “low-income” for the purpose of AB 1550 implementation.

- To identify the low-income census tracts using the statewide median household income, the median household income of each census tract was determined from the 20152019 American Community Survey (ACS) and compared against the statewide median household income determined by the same survey, which was \$75,235.²⁴ Any census tract with a median household income at or below 80 percent of \$ 75,235 (i.e., \$ 60,188) was identified as low-income.
- Additional census tracts were identified based on the threshold designated as low-income by HCD State Income Limits.²⁵ The HCD State Income Limits vary by household size for each county and provide income thresholds for “Acutely Low,” “Extremely Low,” “Very Low,” “Low,” “Median,” and “Moderate” income categories. AB 1550 refers to the “Low” income thresholds within the HCD State Income Limits. This was determined as follows:
- The county-level “low-income” limit from the HCD State Income Limits was used to define “low-income” at the census tract level using the average household size (rounding to the nearest whole number) for each census tract, using the data from the 20152019 ACS.
- Next, the average household size of each census tract was used to determine which “low-income” limit to apply from HCD’s State Income Limits for the appropriate county.
- Additionally, the median household income for each census tract was determined from the ACS and was compared to the appropriate HCD low-income limit. If the median household income for a given census tract was equal to or less than the appropriate HCD low-income limit, then the census tract was defined as “low-income” for the purposes of AB 1550.
- For example, in Sacramento County, any census tract with an average household size of two, and a median income less than \$58,000, is designated as low-income, while for census tracts with an average household size of three the low-income threshold becomes \$65,250.

23 An “affordable unit” for the purposes of AB 680 means a unit that is subject to an affordability restriction for 55 years and is dedicated to individuals of low or moderate income as defined in Health & Safety Code § 50093.

24 US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019 5-year Estimates (20152019).

25 California Department of Housing and Community Development. [State and Federal Income, Rent, and Loan/Value Limits: Official State Income Limits](#)

Low-income households

AB 1550 defines “low-income households” as those with: 1) a household income at or below 80 percent of the statewide median income, or 2) a household income at or below the threshold designated as low-income by HCD State Income Limits.²⁶

For programs that target investments to benefit low-income households for the purpose of meeting AB 1550 investment minimums, administering agencies must determine an approach to assess whether households meet the definition of low-income. See Section IV.C.2. for strategies for identifying income eligibility.

Applicability and updates of definitions and designations

Following the 2022 release of the updated disadvantaged communities and low-income communities and households designations described above, administering agencies selecting projects on or after July 1, 2022 are required to adopt the updated designations for the purposes of program design, guidance materials, project selection and implementation, and reporting.

To avoid disruptions, solicitations and project selections occurring before July 1, 2022, can continue reporting under the designations and thresholds in place at the time the solicitation was released or the project was selected, as applicable. Any given project should maintain its respective framework, for the purposes of reporting, throughout the project stages to ensure consistency in project implementation and reporting. Administering agencies must make additional reporting considerations for multi-year projects, as described in the Funding Guidelines. Current definitions and designations are available on the [California Climate Investments Priority Populations webpage](#).

For program activities that do not fit clearly into the above scenarios, administering agencies should work with CARB to develop an approach for implementing the updated designations on a case-by-case basis.

As CalEPA updates its designations of disadvantaged communities over time, CARB will update the list of low-income communities and the income thresholds for the identification of low-income households.²⁷ Where CalEPA makes additions to the designation of disadvantaged communities based on consultation with federally recognized tribes, minor technical adjustments, or other processes, CARB will update mapping tools and other resources to include these new areas, CARB may also update the list of low-income communities and income thresholds. All California Climate Investments programs must use the most recent definitions and designations made by CalEPA, in accordance with guidance from CARB on an effective date and applicability for new designations.

²⁶ Health & Safety Code § 39713(d)

²⁷ While the two definitions of “low-income” are defined by statute and not subject to change, statewide median household income and county-specific HCD low-income limits will change over time. Hence any update to the identification of low-income communities or households will not be a revision of the low-income definition, but an update with respect to which reference year(s) are used in the identification of low-income communities and households for the purposes of California Climate Investments programs.