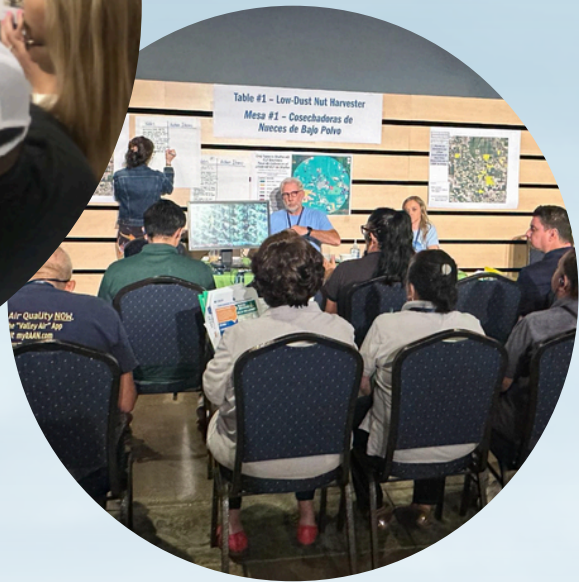


# Assembly Bill 617: Case Study Brief

*Shafter: Community Empowerment and Advocacy  
for Agricultural Pesticide Notification*





## KEY TAKEWAYS

### Community Context:

- Residents of Shafter in Kern County are severely affected by agricultural pesticides, fugitive dust, oil and gas extraction and processing, and heavy truck traffic.

### Key Successes:

- Participatory budgeting and community empowerment in the Shafter AB 617 process has helped redirect significant funding from industry incentives to community-focused air protection measures.

### Key Challenges:

- The ability of the Shafter AB 617 process to implement pesticide notification was stunted by resistance at the local level, but the momentum from AB 617 led to implementation progress at the state scale.

### Lessons Learned:

- Resident and community organization pressure has greatly increased public agency transparency and accountability.

## PREFERRED CITATION

Borison, Henry, Nguyen, Peter, Soroushnejad, Noora, Devereaux, Anna, London, Jonathan K, (2025). Assembly Bill 617: Case Study Brief. Shafter: Community Empowerment and Advocacy for Agricultural Pesticide Notification. UC Davis Department of Human Ecology and Center for Regional Change.

## COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

Shafter, California is a rural community of 21,000 residents, 81% of them Latino, located in the southern San Joaquin Valley. It is one of two AB 617 communities in Kern County. Given its location amid agricultural fields, agricultural pesticide use, and dust pose a significant problem for the community's air quality and, by extension, the health and wellbeing of its residents. In addition to this, oil and gas extraction and processing, as well as infrastructure issues such as dirt or poorly maintained roads also have major effects upon air quality. These factors, alongside the high incidences of cardiovascular disease, poverty, unemployment, and linguistic isolation, paint a picture of a community affected by many barriers to health.



**Figure 1.** Map showing the boundaries of the Shafter AB 617 community. Source: SJV APCD.

At the time of Shafter's inclusion into AB 617 in 2018, heavy duty trucks and locomotives, older/high polluting cars, agricultural sources, oil and gas operations, residential wood burning, fugitive dust, and urban sources were identified as the top community sources of concern. Many of these concerns informed the emissions reduction measures included in Shafter's Community Emission Reduction Plan (CERP) approved by CARB in 2020. There are fifty-two strategies in the CERP including twenty-seven incentive measures, five enforcement measures, nine outreach measures, six land use measures, three permitting measures, and two agency partnership measures.



## SUCCESSIONS

Participatory budgeting and a growing commitment by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (Valley Air District) on community-driven decision-making have helped the Shafter Community Steering Committee (CSC) in pursuing its goals. During the early phases of the creation of the CERP, the Valley Air District presented the community with a list of pre-approved emissions reduction measures, mostly in the form of industry incentives. These measures were subject to much criticism from CSC members residents, who were concerned that the funding awarded through AB 617 to would be granted to polluting industries instead of having the industries take responsibility for meeting stricter Valley Air District rules and regulations. They also wanted more funding for measures that would they perceived as directly benefit residents in their day-to-day lives.

One example was a proposed measure for switching a locomotive from diesel to cleaner fuels. This was based on a CARB pre-approved incentive program that dedicated over \$4 million dollars to replacing diesel railcars. During the creation of the CERP, several members of the CSC authored letters addressed to the Valley Air District suggesting that no money be allocated to the locomotive switchers measure, as they observed this equipment is rarely used in Shafter. While the measure still made it into the final CERP, three years later the CSC was able to vote to move the funding out of this measure through the process of participatory budgeting.

Through a reprioritization exercise conducted during meetings in 2022, the CSC voted to move funding from the locomotive switchers measure to a slew of resident-identified measures including residential wood stoves, vegetative barriers, residential air filtration, residential lawn and garden, and road and sidewalk improvements measures. Shafter CSC members also pushed to include exposure reduction strategies such as low-dust nut harvesters (via an incentive program) and vegetative barriers bordering agricultural fields as well as resident-serving transportation infrastructure such as sidewalks and bike lanes. They also successfully advocated for the inclusion of other community benefits such as trade-in programs for electric lawnmowers and incentives for electric vehicles.

## CHALLENGES

Agricultural pesticide notification has been among the highest priority items for the Shafter CSC. Residents have sought such a program for many years to allow them take protective actions when hazardous pesticides are planned to be applied near their homes, schools, and community spaces. This has been opposed by the agricultural industry and some local governments. The Valley Air District had also resisted community pressure to engage in pesticide-related matters as outside of its jurisdiction. In a major advance, the 2019 CERP contains several measures aimed at “Reducing Exposures to Pesticides in the Community” including pesticide notification. While the Valley Air District lacks statutory jurisdiction to directly implement the measure, with the support of the then director of the California Department of Pesticide Regulation, the document pledges that, “DPR [the Department of Pesticide Regulation] is committed to explore options for a pesticide notification system in Shafter” and “will work with the Kern County Agricultural Commissioner’s Office, CARB and the Air District to identify feasible options for the development and implementation” of said system.

However, despite strong support from the CSC, the Valley Air District, CARB and the leadership of DPR at the time, the Kern County Agricultural Commissioner, which has the local regulatory authority to implement a local pesticide notification system, refused to do so. The CAC argued that the Valley Air District and CARB did not have the authority to address pesticides in this way and that DPR did not have the authority to compel such a system at the local level.

In response, Shafter residents and environmental justice advocates on and beyond the CSC utilized a variety of tactics to help get the notification system implemented. Members of the Shafter CSC wrote multiple letters to the Kern County Agricultural Commissioner (CAC) advocating for a pesticide notification system in their community. CSC members also appealed to DPR, the leadership of the California EPA, and to the Kern County Board of Supervisors, which has authority over the Agricultural Commissioner's Office.

Despite these attempts, the continued opposition of the Kern County Agriculture Commissioner stymied implementation of the program. To overcome this barrier and in response to community pressure, DPR has begun to develop a statewide pesticide notification system. While Shafter did not receive their desired pesticide notification system (SprayDays California) in the short term, it catalyzed progress to serve other agricultural communities across California. Once the statewide program is implemented, Shafter and other Kern County communities will benefit as well.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

The case of Shafter offers some lessons learned for other AB 617 communities and places outside of California on locally-driven air quality management.

Shafter demonstrates the importance of governance that reflect community voice and values. Mechanisms such as a CERP Tracker for the program's strategies and a meeting Action Item Tracker help keep the process transparent and the agencies accountable. The Valley Air District provides detailed presentations to ensure the CSC is well informed, including action item updates, standing updates, and budget updates. While great strides have been made on this front, some CSC members still express concerns about transparency issues. Decisions made in the Shafter Community Steering Committee are based on consensus, as outlined by the CSC Charter.<sup>4</sup> The Valley Air District with the help of the facilitation team often makes the determination on whether consensus is reached during meetings. However, the criteria for consensus are not clearly outlined in the CSC Charter. The voting results is also not often shared during meetings, raising concerns by some CSC members about transparency.



**Figure 2.** Image showing an interactive mapping activity during a CSC meeting. Source: SJV APCD.

The pesticide notification strategy illustrates several challenges and opportunities for expanding the scale of air quality policy in California. First, to be successful AB 617 implementation must expand its scale to include issues outside the immediate jurisdiction of air quality management agencies, such as pesticides. A lack of alignment between local and state agencies responsible for pesticide regulation has made implementation of the visionary CERP strategy on pesticide notification challenging to achieve in Kern County. And yet, this resistance at the local level was effectively countered by activists and with support in the state government to prevail in launching a state-wide notification system that eventually will eventually be implemented in Kern County.

The Shafter CSC's efforts to expand AB 617's original focus of emissions reduction and the emphasis on industry-focused incentives towards resident-focused exposure reduction strategies and investments indicates a transformation in the framing and implementation of AB617. This is an innovation that can be drawn upon by other AB 617 communities and other related community-based processes.

One Shafter CSC observer described their outlook on the AB 617 process and summarized the outlook for the community.

“

I think that [Shafter], in essence, is the spirit of AB 617, that it could be a place where really amazing things happen. It also could be a place where a lot of great ideas die, right? And if there is... a will of the people to actually keep it alive and sustain it, and they're resilient enough, then it will grow into something bigger, right?”

”

- Shafter CSC Observer

## REFERENCES

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Shafter Community Steering Committee Charter  
<https://community.valleyair.org/media/zllnudpq/finalshaftersteeringcommitteecharter.pdf>

<sup>1</sup>Shafter Community Emissions Reduction Plan 2019.  
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