

2019 BizFed Leadership Roundtable Series: Mike Stoker

Region 9 of the Environmental Protection Agency is open for business. Or at least open TO businesses that have questions, concerns or are in need of grants and other services that Region 9 can provide.

That was the take away from BizFed Central Valley's May 14 Leadership Roundtable discussion with Mike Stoker, the new Region 9 Director.

While Stoker can't do much about California's regulatory demands on business re: air and water quality, he can emphasize resource placement and he can instill a partnership culture in his department. So far, he explained, he's being trying to move resources where they have most impact, such as the island territories and tribal areas covered by Region 9. He has found that pouring resources (such as grants and other assistance) on smaller areas tends to have a bigger impact and solves problems more quickly.

And he's been working with his staff to encourage them to reach out to businesses and industry sectors to answer questions and to ask questions. Businesses are often the best experts in how to reduce emissions or improve water quality if they're offered incentives and encouragement rather than fines and punitive measures.

That willingness to look at issues from industry's side has served him well in his career,

particularly when he was a Santa Barbara County supervisor. And it's still serving him well in his current roll.

When asked about aquifer exemptions – which many environmentalists have tried to use to shut down underground injection of oilfield produced water – Stoker explained how he's been working in this politically touchy area.

Aquifer exemptions allow oilfield produced water to be injected into known aquifers that are NOT considered useable for drinking water, per the Clean Water Act. Over the years, some exemptions had not kept up with oilfield

expansion even though the injections had not gone beyond the original aquifers. Several years





ago, an activist regulator in the Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources (DOGGR), felt that created a major problem and ceased permitting injection wells. That opened the door for environmentalists to call for a full-scale review of aquifer exemptions, which involved DOGGR and the state Water Resources Control Board. The EPA's role was to wait for those agencies to complete their reviews and then it would review their reviews for a final OK.

The system was bogging down at the state agency level, leaving EPA tapping its toes at the end of the process. Now, Stoker said, he's having his staff review the exemption petitions much earlier in the process. That has helped move things along more quickly.

Stoker committed to having more meetings between his staff and BizFed CV members, even for very specific issues.

"We're not the bad guy," Stoker said of Region 9. "We're not out to get you."

