For Immediate Release

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Local Families To Benefit From Energy Vote

San Francisco – On a 4-1 vote today, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) approved 11 affordable energy pilot projects in disadvantaged communities in the San Joaquin Valley.

The projects will increase access to affordable and renewable energy for more than 1,600 households that have never had access to natural gas in the communities of Allensworth, Alpaugh, California City, Cantua Creek, Ducor, Fairmead, Lanare, Le Grand, La Vina, Seville and West Goshen.

The projects for these communities in Fresno, Kern, Tulare, Madera, and Merced counties will bring in about $56 million in investment and infrastructure spending, and as a result, Valley residents, who live in some of the most economically disadvantaged regions in the state, will no longer need to rely on expensive propane and wood burning to stay warm, to cook and to have hot water. This investment will not only provide access to more affordable energy, but will also give families new cutting-edge and energy efficient appliances, which together, can save residents up to $150 per month on their energy bills and nearly $2,000 per year for some households.

“Today, the CPUC took a step toward addressing the historic neglect that hinders health and opportunity in disadvantaged communities by increasing access to affordable energy,” said Leslie Martinez, policy advocate with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, one of the organizations that supported residents in pursuit of these projects. “This victory builds on years of advocacy by community leaders and their determination to contribute to - and share in - the multiple environmental benefits of confronting climate change."

“Some of the poorest communities in the state are forced to pay the highest energy cost, in addition many are facing other challenges like contaminated drinking water and bad air quality,” said Abigail Solis, senior community development specialist for Self Help Enterprises. “The pilot projects will not only directly benefit these 11 communities, but will also provide the basis for future implementation of affordable and clean energy options for the remaining 170 San Joaquin Valley communities that either partially or completely lack access to natural gas.”

“Today’s decision sets a roadmap for affordable and clean energy in other disadvantaged communities. It also addresses decades of inequitable distribution of resources through a process that has been and will continue to be community driven,” said Roger Lin, attorney with the UC Berkeley Environmental Law Clinic. “We thank Commissioner Guzman Aceves and her staff.”

“As the nights are getting colder, it is imperative that the CPUC takes action to secure safe, clean, affordable energy for the communities that have been neglected and prevented from connecting to the grid. We look forward to working with these communities and are gratified to have investments like this in the San Joaquin Valley,” added Caroline Farrell, executive director of the Center on Race, Poverty, & the Environment.

This process has been decades in the making, but reached a critical point in 2013 when residents of Allensworth, with the assistance of the aforementioned community-based organizations, approached the state legislature to inform them of this dire problem and persisted. Residents refer to Allensworth as the “town that refuses to die” because, despite generations of disinvestment, Allensworth still exists. Eventually, in 2014, the state legislature passed Assembly Bill 2672, requiring the CPUC to identify how many and which communities lacked basic energy infrastructure and to analyze cost-effective ways to provide this service. Ultimately, this led to the approval of the 11 pilot projects.

“Implementation of the energy projects will complement efforts aimed at improving the health, well-being and overall quality of life of residents in underserved and disadvantaged communities like Allensworth,” said Kayode Kadara, Allensworth resident and long-time community advocate.

While the news is mostly good, concerns do remain for the areas of Seville and Allensworth. Each community will need to spend $3 million to complete their preferred project.

Further development of the pilot projects is expected to begin immediately.

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The “Pilot Team” has worked closely with pilot community residents, CPUC staff, project developers, and actively participated in this proceeding to reach today’s result. The Pilot Team organizations are:

The Center on Race, Poverty, & the Environment (CRPE) is an environmental justice organization providing legal, organizing, and technical assistance to grassroots groups in low-income communities and communities of color. Our mission is to achieve environmental justice and healthy, sustainable communities through collective action and the law.

UC Berkeley's Environmental Law Clinic undertakes environmental and environmental justice projects local to global in scale, represented the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment during this proceeding, and provided legal support to the Pilot Team.

Self-Help Enterprises is a nationally recognized housing and community development organization whose mission is to work together with low-income families to build and sustain healthy homes and communities. Our community development efforts help San Joaquin Valley rural communities obtain vital infrastructure improvements such as clean and affordable energy, safe drinking water and sanitary sewage services. The lack of resources and barriers to accessing these resources threatens the health of residents. SHE has helped more than 160 small communities and over 30,000 residents with the development and implementation of infrastructure projects. Self-Help Enterprises' staff provides technical assistance including assessing environmental and health issues, provide information to community members and boards, develop project alternatives, evaluate funding sources, community organizing and ultimately foster community decision-making. At the core of this effort is the empowerment of residents to take control of the development of their own community infrastructure needs. Self-Help Enterprises works collaboratively with the communities to attain sustainable infrastructures that support healthy, thriving communities.

Leadership Counsel works alongside the most impacted communities to advocate for sound policy and eradicate injustice to secure equal access to opportunity regardless of wealth, race, income and place. We work with community leaders throughout the San Joaquin Valley and Eastern Coachella Valley on such issues as safe affordable drinking water, basic transit services, wastewater services, decent affordable housing, and the right to live free from industrial pollution with infrastructure that supports healthy lifestyles. Through co-powerment, organizing, litigation, policy advocacy, and research, we confront California's stark inequalities manifest in too many of California's low income communities and communities of color.