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SAN GORGONIO PASS WATER AGENCY
A California State Water Project Contractor

Supervisor Gutierrez Earns Statewide Honor for Fast-Tracking Wildfire Protection

Award comes 20 years after the deadly Esperanza Fire, reinforcing the need for rapid wildfire response

BEAUMONT, CA (November 16, 2026) – Riverside County Fifth District Supervisor Dr. Yxstian Gutierrez has received statewide recognition for helping strengthen wildfire protection across the San Gorgonio Pass, as the region marks 20 years since the deadly Esperanza Fire. Gutierrez received the Mike Gotch Excellence in Public Service Award at the 2026 California Association of Local Agency Formation Commissions (CALAFCO) Annual Conference for advancing a life-saving Heli-Hydrant network in partnership with San Gorgonio Pass Water Agency (SGPWA).

Presented during the conference's second-night Awards Banquet, the honor recognizes extraordinary public service that overcomes institutional barriers and delivers lasting benefits for water customers and the community.

"The Esperanza Fire remains a solemn reminder of the risks our firefighters face and the importance of giving them every possible advantage," said SGPWA Board President Robert Ybarra. "Supervisor Gutierrez understood that urgency and acted on it. His leadership helped turn an ambitious idea into a regional firefighting resource that gives our first responders a critical advantage. We are proud to congratulate him on this well-deserved recognition."

Supervisor Gutierrez secured $1.8 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funding to support six Heli-Hydrants strategically located across the Pass area, on both sides of Interstate 10. Connected to existing water infrastructure, the systems allow firefighting helicopters to remotely activate water tanks and refill in as little as 10 seconds, reducing time away from active suppression.

SGPWA administers the funding and coordinates implementation, working with CAL FIRE, Riverside County Fire and local water providers, including Beaumont-Cherry Valley Water District, the City of Banning, High Valleys Water District, Banning Heights Mutual Water Company and Cabazon Water District. By putting existing water infrastructure to work for emergency response, the partnership is strengthening protection for local water customers and the communities these agencies serve.

"This award reflects what we can accomplish when we put public safety ahead of jurisdictional boundaries," said Supervisor Gutierrez, who also serves as Riverside LAFCO Chair. "Our firefighters face extraordinary risks protecting our communities. They deserve every advantage we can give them. By bringing County funding together with SGPWA's leadership and the

expertise of our local partners, we have built a system that can help save precious time when lives and homes are on the line."

The network's value was demonstrated during the May 2026 Lemon Fire in Cabazon. Firefighting helicopters used both local Heli-Hydrants, shifting between sites when heavy smoke limited access to one location. The fire was contained to about 14 acres, showing how strategically placed refill stations can support rapid aerial response as conditions change.

The first Heli-Hydrant was unveiled in 2025, just 18 months after the regional concept took shape. The initiative has since grown into a coordinated network designed to strengthen wildfire protection across multiple communities and service areas.

Through the Heli-Hydrant partnership, SGPWA and Supervisor Gutierrez are helping ensure crews can access critical resources faster when emergencies strike, strengthening protection for water customers, homes, and businesses across the San Gorgonio Pass.

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About San Gorgonio Pass Water Agency

Formed in 1961, SGPWA is a State Water Contractor that serves a 225-square-mile area of western Riverside County. The service area includes the cities of Calimesa, Beaumont, and Banning, and the communities of Cherry Valley, Cabazon, and the Banning Bench. In addition to importing State Water Project (SWP) water from Northern California to augment local groundwater sources, the Agency builds local system infrastructure, participates in water transfers, partners in statewide water projects and collaborates on regional water reliability and conservation efforts.