

Don't it always seem to go

That you don't know what you've got

'Til it's gone

—Joni Mitchell (“Big Yellow Taxi”)

On this, the last day of **Jerry Brown**’s tenure as California’s governor, it’s appropriate to reflect on Governor Brown’s environmental legacy. And a most formidable legacy it’s been.

Brown has, quite simply, been the most environmentally conscious and effective governor in California’s 169-year history—by a wide margin. While he’s served four full four-year terms as Governor, it is over his most recent two terms (2011-19) that Brown’s environmental leadership and achievements have been most prominent.



To a considerable degree, the success of Governor Brown’s administration can be attributed to the assemblage of top leaders he recruited and appointed to the state’s most important environmental positions. Here’s a brief list:

California Secretary for Environmental Protection **Matt Rodriquez** has been the most effective CalEPA Secretary in the history of that office. Leading a sprawling cabinet-level agency, Rodriquez has ably led California’s pollution control and water resource

management efforts. One of his most important achievements has been directing California’s successful efforts to transform environmental justice from an aspiration into a tangible set of goals and programs.

Secretary for Natural Resources **John Laird** has been quietly effective in directing California’s natural resource management agencies, implementing the California Environmental Quality Act and leading the state’s climate change adaptation efforts. One of Laird’s first challenges was to address—successfully—some longstanding problems the Brown Administration inherited at the state Department of Parks and Recreation and the Department of Conservation’s Division of Oil and Gas. Once those reforms were implemented, the Natural Resources Agency has operated smoothly and well under Laird’s direction.

The Brown Administration’s most high-profile environmental official is **Mary Nichols**, Chair of the California Air Resources Board. Nichols actually served as Governor Brown’s CARB Chair twice—in his first administration in the 1970’s and `80’s, and then again during his most recent two terms as governor. Under Nichols’ stellar leadership, CARB has emerged as the nation’s most respected and effective regulatory agency concerning both conventional air pollution control and in implementing California’s pioneering greenhouse gas emission reduction goals. (Fortunately, Nichols has agreed to continue her leadership role at CARB for at least the first phase of Governor-elect Gavin Newsom’s incoming administration.)

Similarly, **Felicia Marcus** has proven to be a most effective leader of the influential State Water Resources Control Board. The Board oversees California’s myriad water pollution control efforts, and also administers the state’s complex (and always-controversial) water rights system. A veteran environmental lawyer and policymaker, Marcus has been especially effective in leading California’s drought response efforts during Governor Brown’s recent tenure. The five-member Water Board appointed by Governor Brown is the most progressive in the history of the Board. (One of incoming Governor Newsom’s most consequential, initial personnel decisions will be whether to reappoint Marcus as Chair of the Water Board. He should.)



Governor Brown and President Barack Obama tour drought-stricken farm land in Los Banos, CA. Photo by Pete Souza (2014).

Ken Alex has worn two environmental hats in the Brown Administration over the past eight years: as Director of the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, he has revived a previously-moribund office, led the state’s land use planning efforts and chaired California’s Strategic Growth Council, which is responsible for coordinating the state’s multifaceted climate change programs. Alex also has been Governor Brown’s most prominent day-to-day environmental advisor “inside the horseshoe.” One of his most outstanding achievements has been leading Governor Brown’s efforts to forge greenhouse gas reduction agreements with scores of subnational governments around the world.

Another excellent Brown appointee has been **Chuck Bonham**, Director of California’s Department of Fish and Wildlife. Once a backwater agency primarily responsible for issuing fishing and hunting licenses and setting fish and game limits, the Department in more recent years has been delegated a wide array of environmental responsibilities: administering California’s Endangered Species Act; oil spill response; CEQA consultation; and ecosystem management. The Department of Fish and Wildlife has in the 21st century been one of the “lightning rod” agencies of California state government. But under Bonham’s steady leadership, the Department has prospered and earned widespread respect.

Governor Brown also deserves kudos for his thoughtful appointments to numerous other state boards and commissions responsible for environmental policymaking. His appointees to the **California Public Utilities Commission** have dramatically improved the policies and culture of that previously-troubled agency. Brown’s appointees to the **California Energy Commission** and **California Coastal Commission** have similarly made those

bodies more effective and respected. And Governor Brown’s appointments to the bistate **Tahoe Regional Planning Agency** include Clem Shute and Bill Yeates, two of California’s most well-respected and thoughtful environmental lawyers.

Ultimately, however, it all comes back to Governor Jerry Brown. And Governor Brown’s environmental accomplishments go well beyond making a stellar batch of executive appointments. Over the past eight years, Brown has demonstrated a commanding and prescient vision when it comes to energy policy, water issues and—most importantly—climate change policy. That vision has been especially critical over the last two years of Brown’s governorship, when he’s emerged as a state bulwark against the misguided and unprincipled environmental policies emanating from Washington, D.C. Finally, Governor Brown’s environmental leadership extends to serving as California environmental educator-in-chief: he’s been willing to speak directly and clearly to 40 million Californians about climate change, renewable energy, finite state water supplies and wildfire response. And he’s done so most effectively over the past eight years.



Governor Brown meets with Cal Fire Officials in Shasta County, CA during the Carr Fire. Photo by Hung T. Vu (2018).

To be sure, Governor Brown’s environmental record is not perfect: for example, he’s received criticism from environmental groups for his policies regarding oil drilling and fracking. In recent months, Brown has seemed too willing to bend environmental rules to direct more water to California’s agribusiness interests. And he leaves office without having been able to forge strong public support behind one of his legacy projects, bringing a high speed rail system to California.

But it would be a mistake to let the perfect be the enemy of the good when it comes to Governor Brown's environmental legacy. There's little doubt that history will view Brown as the most visionary and effective environmental governor in state history. And that, to this observer, is a most accurate assessment.

As Joni Mitchell aptly observed, you don't know what you've got `til it's gone. As he departs the Governor's Office, let's take a moment to reflect on and celebrate Jerry Brown's environmental record.

Here's offering a tip of the cap, Governor Brown. When it comes to California's environment, you will be most sorely missed.