CEQA Deep Dive:

Policy Analysis of Environmental Exemption Legislation and Application



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The report was created in fulfillment of the UC Davis Environmental Policy and Management Policy Clinic requirement in partnership with Melissa Sparks-Kranz of the League of California Cities, who served as the project client.

The contents of this report do not represent the opinions or positions of the University of California Davis, the UC Davis Environmental Policy and Management program, or the League of California Cities.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 3
Introduction 3
Background 4
Methods 6
CEQA Exemption Legislation Database 6
CEQAnet Exemptions Database 8
Analysis 9
CEQA Exemption Legislation Trends 9
Exemption Legislation Topic Summaries 9
Agriculture and Forestry Resources 9
Air Quality 9
Conservation/Habitat 9
Economics/Jobs 9
Energy 9
Housing 10
Land Use/Planning 10
Mineral Resources 10
Public Services 10
Recreation 11
Schools and Universities 11
Sewer Capacity 11
Transportation 11
Tribal Gaming Compacts 11
Utilities/Service Systems 12
Water Systems 12
Wildfire 12
Notice of Exemption Filing Trends 13
Categorical Exemptions 14
Recently Legislated CEQA Exemptions 14
Discussion 14
References 15
Appendices 15
CEQA Exemption Statutes Amended and Added 2010-2025 15
Categorical Exemption Class Descriptions 15

Abbreviations & Acronyms

Abbreviation or Acronym	Definition
AB	Assembly Bill
ADU	Accessory Dwelling Unit
CAEP/AEP	California Association of Environmental Professionals
CDFW	California Department of Fish and Wildlife
CEQA	California Environmental Quality Act
CPUC	California Public Utilities Commission
GOV	California Government Code
HSC	California Health and Safety Code
LA-RICS	Los Angeles Regional Interoperable Communications System
LCI/OPR	Governor's Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation, formerly Governor's Office of Planning and Research
LEED	Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design
NEPA	National Environmental Protection Act
PRC	California Public Resources Code
SB	Senate Bill

Introduction

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is one of California's most significant environmental policy frameworks. It requires state and local agencies to evaluate and disclose the environmental impacts of proposed projects before its approval. Enacted in 1970, CEQA has been a foundational tool for environmental protection, government transparency, and public participation. However, CEQA has continually evolved through legislative changes, and the creation of exemptions and streamlining provisions have attempted to balance both environmental protection and efficient project delivery. One of the most significant changes to CEQA over the past several decades has been the growth of statutory exemptions. These exemptions, once signed into law, have allowed certain projects to proceed without the full CEQA review process when environmental impacts are determined to be minimal or when other policy goals, like housing production and infrastructure investment, justify an expedited approval process. As exemptions continue to accumulate, it's important for policymakers, local governments, and stakeholders to understand how they are used in practice and create a foundation for ongoing and more detailed exemption tracking.

The purpose of this report is to evaluate how CEQA statutory and categorical exemptions have evolved since the initial enactment of each law, and to examine how these exemptions have been applied and implemented. The League of California Cities (CalCities), our project client, seeks to better understand how CEQA exemptions have grown over time, the types of project exemptions that are being used, and whether the use of these exemptions align with the original legislative intent of CEQA or other specific policy goals of the state. By examining the origin of policies and the application of their exemptions, this project aims to provide insight into how the CEQA framework has changed based on policy priorities and development needs. To address these goals, this project conducts an in-depth analysis of the statutory exemptions enacted between 2010 and 2025. The language and policy objectives of each exemption were reviewed to understand their intended purpose. Additionally, this report examines the real-world application of these exemptions using project data from the CEQA State Clearinghouse and CEQANet, California's repository of environmental review documentation and Notice of Exemptions (NOEs). These datasets provide insight into how exemptions are used across different project types.

The scope of this project includes a policy analysis and empirical analysis of exemption usage. The research was used to:

1. Identify and categorize all statutory CEQA exemptions enacted from 2010 to 2025; and
2. Identify patterns and trends in the application of exemptions across California.

Utilizing these two approaches, the report aims to provide a better understanding of how statutory exemptions function within the entire CEQA process. Final deliverables for this project include two public-facing handouts, one displaying a timeline of CEQA

exemptions and another summarizing exemptions applications by project type. Additionally, this comprehensive report summarizes trends, usage patterns, and policy implications with exemptions. Together, these materials will provide a clearer understanding of how CEQA exemptions have developed over time and how they are currently being applied.

Background

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) is a public disclosure law that requires state and local governments to examine environmental impacts that may occur due to a proposed project.[1] The CEQA review process applies to projects where public agencies have discretion for approval. CEQA was enacted in late 1970 by Governor Ronald Reagan, following the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This was made possible by the growing environmental movement starting in around the 1950s-1960s. Following NEPA, several other environmental policies were put in place to protect the US within a 10 year time span.[2] CEQA revealed the decision-making process of California public agencies, which the public was not privy to previously.[3] The law provided residents with a comment period, an opportunity to voice concerns and express opposition to government projects, which was a powerful tool due to an increase in infrastructure development after World War II.[4] In 1972, CEQA was expanded to apply to all projects in the state that needed discretionary approval. This led to the public's ability to challenge private developers in addition to public projects and environmentally harmful facilities.[5]

When CEQA was passed, it had bipartisan support due to the concern for environmental harm, negative impact to public health from pollution, and increased development.[6] Like many laws, there are benefits and costs to CEQA. The law allows projects to be reviewed and provides opportunities for public involvement, benefitting California residents because it is a tool to safeguard the health of the public. CEQA holds agencies and developers accountable by demanding transparency from all parties, and as California's goals and needs change, exemptions to the law can be added and amended.[7] Conversely, there are lengthy review periods that may expand a project's timeline and slow legal processes by limiting progress and development.

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[1] Rivasplata, *Practical CEQA: A Stepwise Guide to California Environmental Quality Act Compliance.*

[2] Kahler, "Environmental Awakening."

[3] Rivasplata, *Practical CEQA: A Stepwise Guide to California Environmental Quality Act Compliance.*

[4] Knight, "To Save San Francisco, a Democrat Wants to Scrap Environmental Reviews."

[5] Knight, "To Save San Francisco, a Democrat Wants to Scrap Environmental Reviews."
[6] White, "From GreenIcon to Housing Villain: The Fall of California's Landmark Environmental Law."
[7] Sierra Club California, "The California Environmental Quality Act."

There is current debate among the California State Legislature and stakeholders about whether the environmental review process should be reformed, overhauled, or dismantled. As the California housing crisis and energy demands grow along with the need for climate resiliency due to climate change, the long CEQA review process and the ability to challenge are seen as impediments to projects such as infill housing and solar farms.[8] The California legislature passed SB 1456 and AB 231 in 2010 and 2019 respectively. The bills were put in place to help reduce lawsuits that have no merit and to help streamline the CEQA process by allowing developers to use a recent Environmental Impact Report (EIR) from a similar project as long as the proposed project impacts are not greater than the one being referenced.[9] Another response to the lengthy CEQA process is the creation of exemptions, typically for projects with little to no environmental impact or projects that further other California policy goals even if there is significant impact.

Exemptions help to reduce time and money spent on the review process and legal challenges that can prolong or even stop projects.[10] Exemptions are projects or project categories that do not fall under the CEQA review process.[11] There are several exemption categories that help streamline the CEQA process, such as the Statutory exemptions, ministerial projects, emergency exemptions, categorical exemptions, and common sense exemptions.[12] Statutory exemptions are created by the California Legislature that are codified in state statute, and summarized as references in the CEQA Guidelines. Statutory CEQA exemptions can be found in Public Resource Code Section 21000 specifically 21080. Ministerial projects fall outside of the CEQA law because they involve little to no discretion from public officials. Emergency exemptions are for actions that are necessary to prevent, reduce impact from, or halt an emergency. Under CEQA, emergencies need to be sudden, unexpected, and demand immediate action to be considered as an emergency exemption. Categorical exemptions are determined by the California Secretary for Natural Resources who deem classes of projects to have no significant impact on the environment, although there are exceptions to categorical exemptions. Common sense exemptions exist because even if none of the above exemptions apply, a project may not be subject to CEQA if it is certain that the project will not have significant impacts on the environment.

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[8] Knight, “To Save San Francisco, a Democrat Wants to Scrap Environmental Reviews.”
[9] Sheppard, “Governor Schwarzenegger Signs Two Bills Providing Moderate CEQA - California Environmental Quality Act Improvements”
[10] CEB, “Navigating CEQA Exemptions in California with CEB.”
[11] Rivasplata, *Practical CEQA: A Stepwise Guide to California Environmental Quality Act Compliance.*

[12] California Department of Transportations, “Chapter 34: Exemptions to CEQA.”

For the purposes of this project, statutory exemptions were the primary focus, while also reviewing other categorical and common sense exemptions as part of the CEQA Clearinghouse dataset.

Table 1. Types of CEQA Exemptions

Exemption Category	Definitions[13]
Statutory Exemptions	Statutory exemptions are created by the California Legislature. These exemptions are codified in state statute, and summarized as references in the CEQA Guidelines. CEQA exemptions are in Public Resource Code Section 21000 specifically 21080.
Ministerial Projects	Ministerial projects fall outside of the CEQA law because they involve little to no discretion from public officials.
Emergency Exemptions	Emergency exemptions are for actions that are necessary to prevent, reduce impact from, or halt an emergency. Under CEQA, emergencies need to be sudden, unexpected, and demand immediate action to be considered as an emergency exemption.
Categorical Exemptions	Categorical exemptions are determined by the California Secretary for Natural Resources who deem classes of projects to have no significant impact on the environment.
Common Sense Exemptions	Common sense exemptions exist because even if none of the above exemptions apply, a project may not be subject to CEQA if it is certain that the project will not have significant impacts on the environment.

Methods

This research project was conducted using publicly available information and analyzed with Microsoft suite applications. Microsoft Excel was the main software used to compile, organize, clean, categorize, and analyze all datasets. Excel was used to create organized worksheets, apply formulas for project type classification, summary tables, analyze trends, and visualizations. Microsoft PowerPoint was used to develop final handouts, timelines, and presentation materials that communicated with the findings to create the Legislative Trends in CEQA Exemptions Handout.

[13] California Department of Transportations, “Chapter 34: Exemptions to CEQA.”

CEQA Exemption Legislation Database

To analyze trends in CEQA exemptions by project type for this report, a dataset was developed using CEQA Statute and Guidelines published by AEP from 2010 through 2025. Each year, AEP publishes a guidelines document that is publicly accessible that summarizes legislative changes and legal findings related to CEQA. The legislative summary includes bills that are added, amended, or both added/amended categorical, statutory, or ministerial exemptions in the dataset. For each bill exemption, information was collected, a link to the full text of the bill was added, organized in the spreadsheet with consistent fields, and field descriptions were added, as seen in table 2.

Table 2. CEQA Exemption Legislation Database Field Descriptions

Database Fields	Definitions
Bill Number	House of origin (AB or SB) and bill number.
Year in Effect	Year that bill goes into effect as law.
Bill Year	Year in which bill was passed.
Chapter Number	Chapter in "Statutes of YEAR".
Author	Last name of bill lead author(s) or name of authoring committee.
Exemption Type	Statutory, Categorical, or Ministerial.
Code Number	Section number of statute within code.
Code Name	Name of state legislative code (Public Resources Code, Government Code).
Added or Amended	Note of whether the bill adds or amends a statute section.
Length of Time in Effect (Years)	Number of years in effect based on statute repeal date as of the year bill was enacted.
Expiration Year	If applicable, year statute expires or repeals itself.
Development Type	CEQAnet Database Development Type category. This was manually assigned during data curation.
Project Type	Project Type category. This is different from the CEQAnet Database Project Issue Type categories, which use many of the same category labels.

Specific Region Exemption	If applicable, name of specific region, location, or project to which exemption applies.
Limitation or Conditions	Notes that include sunset dates, anything that specifies how the bill will be applied, and specific criteria or conditions. These notes are by nature incomplete. See bill text for complete details.
Budget Bill Status	“Yes” if bill is a budget bill, “No” otherwise.
Team Summary (Plain Language)	Plain language summary of what the bill does based on AEP summaries and bill summary language.

Data entry was done through manual review of AEP resources, bills, and statute language, and the project types were assigned based on the focus of each exemption. The additional worksheets added within the workbook were made to support organization and analysis. These included reference sheets defining each field and separate areas to analyze each variable such as project type, time period, and exemption type.

CEQAnet Exemptions Database

The CEQAnet Exemptions database was developed to compile Notice of Exemptions (NOEs) entries from 2010 to 2025 using records downloaded from the official CEQAnet website, which is a publicly accessible repository of Notices of Exemptions filed with the State Clearinghouse. Lead agencies or project applicants under CEQA are not required to submit Notices of Exemption. Filing a NOE voluntarily did reduce the period to legally challenge an exemption decision from 180 days to 35 days, providing a strong incentive to file NOEs. Before SB 69 (2023) which took effect January 1, 2024, a local agency could file a NOE with just the local county clerk. SB 69 (2023) requires that all NOEs filed with county clerks also be filed with the State Clearinghouse. As such CEQAnet is missing records of NOEs filed only with a county clerk and any project without a filed NOE. However, the CEQAnet database remains the best, publicly available data source of NOEs.

In looking at each year of NOE data, the yearly worksheets followed the same structure, including fields such as SCH (State Clearing House) Number, lead agency information, document title, project title, exemption citation, and exemption description. To assign Project Type codes for each NOE, two formulas were used to assign project type categories to exemption records based on the text reported in the “NOE Exempt Citation” field. Formula one prioritized searching for the first NOE citations and then legislative statute citation to return a single match. Formula two searched for all matching citation strings and connected all corresponding project type categories into

one cell for records containing multiple exemptions. The citation text in each yearly sheet was compared against a separate reference table in the “Exempt Codes” or “Sec_Ex_Codes” sheet, which had citation values, legislative citation variations, and corresponding project type labels. Since the citation formatting was inconsistent across records in the public CEQAnet database (as entered by individual submittees), the formulas used organized the information by removing spaces and searching by both NOE citations and legislative statute references-based entries. The formulas allowed the data to be identified by a project type even when the NOE citations were written differently. When no match could be found, the record was left blank or flagged for later review. During the review, some NOE citations required manual classifications to be assigned with an appropriate project type due to inconsistencies. The label “Void” was used for exemption of database entry errors or for records where the NOE exemption citation or description could not be interpreted. After cleaning the workbook, the dataset was analyzed to identify patterns in exemption usage over time and across project types. The analysis focused on answering the following questions:

- How many NOEs cited Categorical and Statutory exemptions?
- How many times are 2010-2025 added or amended statutes cited?
- Of those that cite 2010-2025 added or amended statutes, what project types are using these exemptions?
- What specific statutes and citations are being used?
- How has the use of exemptions in 2010-2025 added or amended statutes changed over time?
- How often are each of the categorical exemptions cited in NOEs, and has this changed over time?

Additional formulas were used to develop and identify trends to create summary tables, trend models, and visualizations that informed the final research findings.

Analysis

CEQA Exemption Legislation Trends

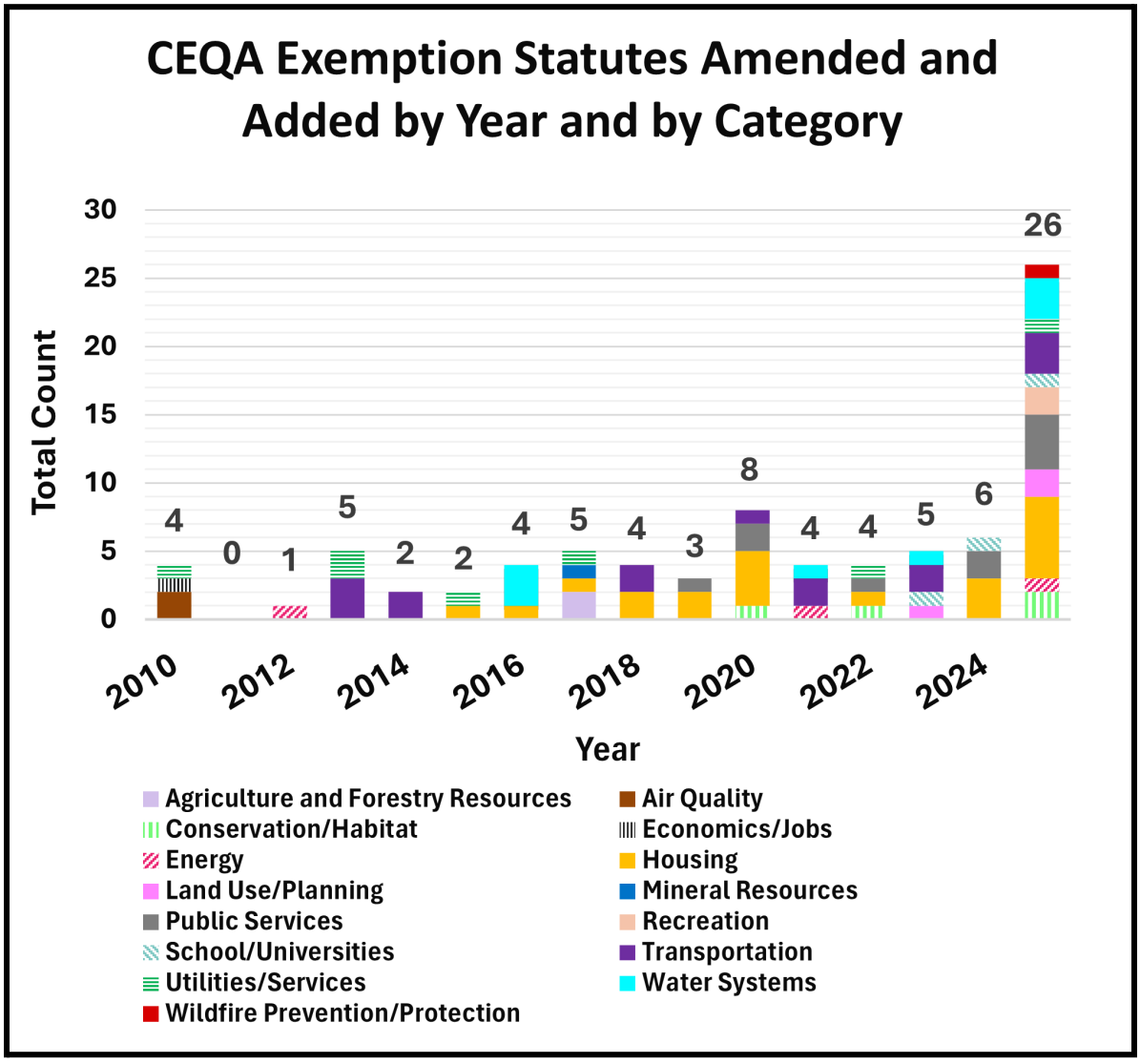
The California Legislature passed 65 bills adding or amending CEQA exemptions across 65 distinct statute sections from 2010 to 2025. A single bill may modify more than one statute section, and many of the exemption statutes have been modified multiple times during the analysis period. Below, we have summarized the CEQA exemption legislation by project type or topical category. While some exemptions could be related to multiple topics, we have assigned each exemption statute to a single topic. In some cases, a single statute section may contain a different exemption at different points in time as provisions are repealed and replaced. Overall, we categorized the recent CEQA exemption legislation into 16 project type categories.

The creation of exemptions to streamline CEQA has stimulated questions regarding the types and trends of CEQA exemption legislation. CEQA exemption legislation between

2010-2025 was compiled and analyzed with the goal of uncovering patterns and trends over time. By examining the frequency and timing of statutory exemptions, this analysis identifies how evolving policy priorities have shaped the application of CEQA during the study period. The section provides broader policy context along with the documentation of these trends. Overall, the data shows that the Legislature has increasingly used CEQA exemptions in response to state priorities, especially housing.

Figure 1 depicts the total number of CEQA exemption statute additions or amendments going into effect each year, which provides a view of how exemption activity has evolved over time. This data accounts for instances where the Legislature modified statute through multiple bills within a single year. This captures the breadth of exemption activity and legislative engagement in specific policy areas.

Figure 1. CEQA Exemption Statutes Amended and Added by Year and by Category



Several patterns emerge from this analysis. The data highlights significant growth in the housing exemption category, with the highest number of statutory exemptions occurring in 2020 and 2025. These increases suggest legislative focus on reducing regulatory barriers to housing production in response to California's ongoing housing shortage, including affordable housing. The clustering of exemptions in these years may reflect a broader policy alignment around housing as a statewide priority, resulting in multiple statutory interventions within a single legislative cycle.

In contrast, exemptions related to transportation and utilities appear more consistent across the study period. Rather than exhibiting sharp spikes, these categories appear to garner continuous attention throughout the study period, reflecting a baseline level of legislative attention to system upgrades and transportation needs.

Utilities/Service Systems

Early exemptions between 2010-2015 focused on infrastructure for small-scale hazardous materials and biogas pipelines, including upgrades to natural gas systems. During this period, there was also a recognition of the need to support public safety communications, as seen in legislation enabling Los Angeles County to expand radio and broadband facilities.

By the mid to late 2010s, the scope of exemptions broadened to include communication infrastructure more explicitly, including facilities on publicly owned sites that transmit or receive radio signals. This shift indicated the importance of telecommunications systems as critical infrastructure.

From 2020 onward, the trend expanded further to include digital connectivity statewide. The progression from allowing linear broadband development within right-of-ways to expanding those exemptions suggests an increased prioritization of statewide connectivity. Overall, the trend showed the Legislature using CEQA exemptions to accelerate the delivery of essential infrastructure services.

Transportation

The bills in the Transportation category collectively demonstrated a sustained effort to streamline CEQA review for transportation and mobility, with an increased emphasis on sustainability and multimodal infrastructure over time. Early legislation in 2013 focused primarily on public safety and gradual improvements such as the closure of unsafe railroad crossings and minor safety improvements to local roads. That same year, exemptions also began to support bicycle infrastructure, including adding bike lanes through restriping existing streets.

By 2014 and 2018, the Legislature expanded its focus to more comprehensive planning efforts. Bike transportation plans were adopted and implemented in urbanized areas. These exemptions reduced procedural barriers for coordinated investments in bike lanes, parking, and related infrastructure. This shift reflected a transition from isolated safety fixes to more integrated, active transportation planning.

A significant evolution occurred beginning in 2021 with broader exemptions under SB 288 (2021), which extended beyond bicycle infrastructure to include zero-emission fuel stations, pedestrian facilities, and mass transit projects. This marked a clear pivot toward aligning CEQA exemptions with California's climate and decarbonization goals. Subsequent legislation in 2023 continued this trend by facilitating active transportation plans and rapid transit developments in urban areas, furthering the state's commitment to sustainable transportation.

By 2025, exemptions expanded to support larger-scale transit demands, for example zero-emission passenger rail projects, residential infill near major transit stops, and high-speed rail infrastructure. This progression demonstrated a shift from small-scale changes to transit system improvements. The trend reflects increased exemptions to accelerate projects that promote safety and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Figure 1 illustrates that typically, the legislature modifies only a handful of CEQA exemption statutes.

Most years, the Legislature added or amended fewer than 10 CEQA exemptions, suggesting an approach to modifying environmental review requirements that is relatively calculated and incremental. However, 2025 stood out as a clear outlier where the Legislature enacted 26 exemptions across 12 exemption categories. The 2025 exemptions were diverse, spanning housing, public services, infrastructure, and schools and universities. More than half of these exemptions (51.8%) were enacted through three budget trailer bills, AB 130 (2025), SB 131 (2025), and SB 158 (2025), highlighting the strategic use of the expedited budget bill process to advance CEQA streamlining measures. AB 130 and SB 131, aimed to increase housing through infill development and rezoning, farmworker housing repair, transportation infrastructure maintenance, and wildfire protections.

Within this broader set of exemptions, housing-related exemptions were particularly prominent. There were six housing exemptions that addressed a range of development types of regulatory barriers including agriculture employee housing, ordinances for accessory dwelling unit (ADU) development, and mixed-use housing projects. Additionally, exemptions within the public services category targeted essential community facilities including health clinics, homelessness services, day care centers, and advanced manufacturing. This suggests an effort to streamline projects with social and public welfare benefits as well as industry interests and state industry goals.

Summaries of All Project Types

Agriculture and Forestry Resources

The Agriculture and Forestry Resources category consists of one bill, SB 94 (2017), that amended two sections of statute to exempt from CEQA local ordinances and CDFW regulations of commercial cannabis activities and cultivation. This bill enabled local governments and state agencies to create rules and regulations in response to

recreational cannabis use legalization under Proposition 64 (2016) without having to go through CEQA and went into effect in 2018.

For wildfire protection and prevention exemptions related to Forestry Resources, see the **Wildfire** category below.

Air Quality

The Air Quality category consisted of one bill, AB 1318 (2010), which exempted the selection and transfer of emissions credit by the South Coast Air Quality Management District. The South Coast Air Quality Management District is in an extreme non-attainment air quality area, making emission offset credits difficult to obtain. The bill was passed to expedite this process for the Sentinel Energy Center, a power plant project that was halted by a court injunction prior to the bill's passing.

Conservation and Habitat

The Conservation/Habitat category consists of four bills adding or amending four statutes, which were all passed after 2020. These CEQA exemptions covered native fish, wildlife habitat restoration projects, and land transfers for conservation and habitat purposes. Two bills passed between 2024-2025 to amend a previous statute to revise the definition of "natural protected lands" and extend a restoration focused CEQA exemption until 2030.

Three of the statutes suggest a pattern of increased legislative emphasis on streamlining environmental restoration efforts, particularly in response to climate change and biodiversity loss. Additionally, there is a shift toward refining and extending existing exemptions rather than creating new ones, indicating more targeted policy adjustments over time.

Economics and Jobs

The Economic and Jobs category consists of one bill adding one statutory CEQA exemption that applies to projects such as large-scale entertainment and sports stadiums, associated mixed-use developments or infrastructure improvements that support economic activity, and region-specific initiatives intended to create jobs and generate tax revenue. The bill, ABX3 81 (2010), was passed during an extraordinary legislative session to address the state's fiscal emergency. The bill established a statutory exemption for a stadium complex project in the City of Industry, including related infrastructure and approvals. The exemption applies to all phases of the project and removes general plan consistency requirements.

Energy

The Energy category consists of three bills adding or amending three statutes. All three bills exempt from CEQA maintenance or upgrades to existing surfaces and structures, including solar installations on rooftops and parking lots, utility-scale energy storage facilities, and backup power systems for telecommunications infrastructure. One bill, SB 1342 (2024), specifically expands exemptions to include the San Vicente Energy

Storage Facility and a maintenance project of the South Bay Sewage Treatment Plant in San Diego County. Two of three bills exempt projects involving renewable and emergency energy storage. These statutes expand CEQA exemptions for projects that support energy reliability without disturbing new land. This pattern could highlight a shift in policy toward upgrading existing infrastructure, especially for clean energy and emergency preparedness, without having to go through CEQA.

Housing

The Housing category contained the most bills of any category, with 20 bills that added or amended 17 statute sections. A majority of the bills passed centered around exempting from CEQA specific housing types such as multi-family, mixed-use, accessory dwelling units, agricultural, or transit-oriented development. A few bills were related to the Multifamily Housing Program or the Housing Accountability Act. Other bills exempted housing developments based on location, including one that was specific for the cities near the 2018 Camp Fire in Butte County to support rebuilding housing or another bill that exempted housing projects within sustainability districts. Most notably, AB 130 (2025) expanded CEQA exemptions for infill housing developments in cities and urban areas based on specified criteria. SB 131 (2025) exempted agricultural housing repair and maintenance, as well as rezoning action that implements a local jurisdiction's approved housing element (excluding any rezoning that would allow for the construction of a distribution center, oil and gas infrastructure, or construction that occurs within the boundaries of any natural or protected lands). These two housing exemptions were among 10 different project types that were exempted from CEQA and included in SB 131. The cumulative effect of these exemptions highlights an increasingly aggressive use of CEQA exemptions to allow ease of housing production. It also reflects a shift toward integrating housing policy with city and county housing elements and overall state goals.

Land Use and Planning

The Land Use/Planning category contains two bills that amend three statute sections. These bills were passed recently in 2023 and 2025. The first bill exempted from CEQA activities related to the Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation (LCI) and subsidiaries to fund projects that are related to land use, climate resiliency, adaptation, or mitigation in the planning, research, or implementation process. The other bill exempted the implementation of approved housing elements and updates to the state climate adaptation strategies. Both exemptions suggest an increased alignment with planning and climate policy for state-led and programmatic actions. The bills also reflect a shift toward reducing procedural barriers at earlier planning stages, with a greater focus on broader policy changes rather than individual projects.

Mineral Resources

The Legislature passed a single CEQA exemption bill, AB 1142 (2016), that amended a statute concerning mineral resources projects. The bill provided a CEQA exemption for surface mining interim management plans. Interim management plans allow mine

operators to temporarily pause mining operations without triggering reclamation requirements. AB 1142 (2016) was largely supported by the surface mining and related industry interests and opposed by environmental, conservation, air, and water advocacy groups.

Public Services

The state legislature passed 10 bills adding or amending nine statutes establishing CEQA exemptions for public services projects, mainly addressing basic needs and public health. Six of these statutes create exemptions related to serving unhoused or housing insecure populations, including emergency or transitional housing programs, hotel and motel conversions to temporary housing, and administering funding for such programs. Two of the exemptions apply only in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles County, respectively. Other exempted project types include public health and basic needs programs such as needle and syringe collection programs, health clinics, day care centers, and food banks. Notably, the exemption for “advanced manufacturing,” which will likely benefit private and potentially polluting industries, is within the same statute section as exemptions for day care centers, health clinics, and food banks. The CEQA exemption for construction of the Capitol Annex is also included in this category.

Recreation

The Recreation category had two CEQA exemptions. AB 2091 (2025) was added to allow non-motorized public access to public trails with approval by a public park district or the Great Redwood Trail Agency in the North Coast. The second exemption, SB 131 (2025), was added to exempt public park and recreational trail projects funded by the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and the Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (The Climate Bond, Proposition 4, 2024). AB 2091 was supported by the California Association of Parks and Recreation, the Bay Area Ridge Council and the California Trails Foundation. Supporters of SB 131 included pro-housing, labor, and construction groups.

Schools and Universities

The Schools/Universities CEQA exemption category had three exemptions from 2022 to 2024. SB 886 (2023) allowed for affordable housing projects at public universities, while SB 4 (2024) extended similar exemptions to private and religious institutions. The bill, SB 312 (2025), required housing projects that have been exempted to obtain a LEED certification before adding subsequent projects. The LEED certification ensured that building projects adhered to the highest green standards within California. All exemptions in this category were related to student housing projects, and this area may see additional exemptions as California’s housing demand continues to grow.

Sewer Capacity

The Sewer Capacity category consists of Senate Bill 1342, amending one statue. The bill was enacted in 2024 and applies a CEQA exemption to infrastructure projects in

San Diego County. The bill exempts projects such as repair, rehabilitation, or replacement of wastewater and sewage treatment facilities. It also includes exemptions for water and energy infrastructure projects that are tied to system capacity and reliability, as well as large-scale public utility upgrades that address environmental and public health needs. Senate Bill 1342 also expands CEQA streamlining provisions by designating specific infrastructure projects as eligible for expedited environmental review. These include the South Bay Sewage Treatment Plant rehabilitation project and the San Vicente Energy Storage Facility. The bill provides an accelerated judicial review of timelines and concurrent preparation of the administrative record for these specific infrastructure projects. The legislature focuses on specific infrastructure upgrades that deal with important system capacity issues, especially in areas encountering major environmental challenges. The bill reflects a project-specific approach, but with an emphasis on public utilities and environmental compliance rather than economic development.

Transportation

The Transportation category consists of 14 bills adding or amending seven different statutes. These bills provide CEQA exemptions for projects improving existing transportation infrastructure for bicycles, pedestrians, and transit systems. Some specific project exemption types include bicycle lane restriping on existing roadways, minor safety improvements to local roads, and passenger and high-speed rail infrastructure improvements. Several bills expand or modify exemptions for bicycle and active transportation plans that already align with previously approved plans under CEQA. SB 131 (2025) specifically exempts certain high-speed rail facilities located within areas that have previously been analyzed under CEQA.

These statutes show a policy shift toward transportation projects that involve safety, sustainability, and access. Additionally, instead of creating entirely new exemptions, many of the bills are expanding, extending, or refining preexisting ones in order to address geographical or procedural barriers. These bills also show an emerging pattern of reliance on prior plans and EIRs to justify exemptions.

Tribal Gaming Compacts

The Legislature, in ratifying gaming compacts with tribal nations, includes provisions that assert CEQA exemption for tribal gaming in recognition of tribal sovereignty. Because these provisions are reiterations of the rights of tribes as sovereign nations, they are not CEQA exemptions in the typical sense. Of the 109 federally recognized tribes within California’s borders, 62 have tribal-state gaming compacts. These compacts are amended periodically, so the Legislature passes tribal gaming compact ratification bills often. For instance, in 2016, the State of California ratified Tribal gaming compacts with 10 tribes: Pala Band of Mission Indians, Jackson Rancheria Band of Miwuk Indians, Barona Band of Mission Indians, Buena Vista Rancheria of Me-Wuk Indians, Yurok Tribe of the Yurok Reservation, Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians, Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians, Jamul Indian Village, Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation,

and Aqua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. In our review of AEP CEQA Guidelines, tribal gaming compact bills are not typically included in the compiled list of CEQA-relevant bills. However, the 2017 CEQA Guidelines include the 10 ratification bills from 2016. Because these bills primarily concern the government-to-government relationships between California and tribal nations rather than the dominant tensions and trends of CEQA exemption legislation, we have excluded these bills and statutes from the rest of our analysis.

Utilities/Service Systems

The Utilities/Service Systems category consists of seven bills amending or adding five statutes that mostly focus on CEQA exemptions for infrastructure upgrades and expansions within existing systems. Project exemption types include the construction and maintenance of natural gas and biogas pipeline and broadband communication facilities. Most of the project exemptions are limited to existing facilities and subject to safety, environmental, or geographic constraints.

These statutes emphasize the maintenance and upgrades of service infrastructure, and many bills include both temporary or urgency exemptions related to public safety and infrastructure reliability. These exemptions are for specific project types, locations, or agencies, like LA-RICS and the Central Valley biogas system, suggesting an approach to address immediate needs and challenges. Since these project types are specific, Legislators were likely pursuing more case-specific exemptions because they are easier to pass than broader CEQA reform.

Water Systems

The Water Systems category consists of five bills adding or amending eight statutes. These bills were enacted between 2015 and 2025, with several temporary exemptions connected to emergency conditions and others extended. These bills apply CEQA for exemptions to projects such as drinking water infrastructure for small or disadvantaged communities. It also includes exemptions for groundwater, recycled water, and water supply for reliability projects, as well as the maintenance and upgrades of stormwater and public water system facilities.

The bills in this category establish targeted exemptions to improve water access and system reliability. SBI 974 (2020), by Senator Hurtado, creates a ministerial exemption for projects benefiting small or disadvantaged community water systems. Assembly Bill 1642 (2022) similarly exempts well projects designed to prevent system failure, subject to environmental safeguards.

Senate Bill 88 (2015) introduced three separate statutory exemptions during the state's drought emergency, allowing groundwater replenishment, recycled water infrastructure, and groundwater management ordinances to proceed without CEQA review. More recent legislation, such as AB 3227 (2024), exempts routine maintenance of stormwater facilities.

SB 131 (2025) expands and extends prior exemptions by lengthening applicability through 2032 and adding new exemptions for community water projects tied to state funding programs and long-term environmental benefits.

The Legislature's shift from short-term emergency drought response to CEQA exemptions toward a stronger, program-based exemptions focused on water system resilience, public health, and climate adaptation, specifically for disadvantaged communities. The legislature shifts from short term emergency drought response exemptions toward more durable, program-based exemptions focused on water system resilience, public health, and climate adaptation for disadvantaged communities.

Wildfire

The Wildfire category provided one statutory exemption to bill SB 131 (2025). The bill was signed into law on June 30, 2025 and made major CEQA reforms to expedite wildfire mitigation and home hardening efforts. The exemption was added to SB 131 (2025) to exempt home hardening, defensible space, prescribed burns and fuel break projects within 200 feet of a structure in wildfire prone zones from CEQA. California has experienced megadroughts and rising temperatures that have exacerbated wildfire risks. According to CalMatters' Fire Map, as of 2022, half of the 20 largest wildfires in California occurred over the previous five years[14]. Only two of California's biggest wildfires occurred outside of the 21st century. As California prepares the climate change impacts on fire-prone communities, this exemption number should be expected to rise.

Notice of Exemption Filing Trends

Over 100,000 NOE documents have been filed with LCI/OPR from 2010-2025. The number of NOE documents on CEQAnet has generally increased since 2010. CEQAnet NOE filings in 2024 were nearly double the number of filings in previous years due to new filing requirements. Agencies and local governments filing NOEs with count clerk offices must now also file the documents with LCI/OPR, as mandated by SB 69 (2023). Prior to January 1, 2024, lead agencies could forgo filing with the LCI/OPR and simply file with their local county clerk. Certain CEQA exemptions required filing NOE documents with LCI/OPR as a condition of exemption prior to 2024.

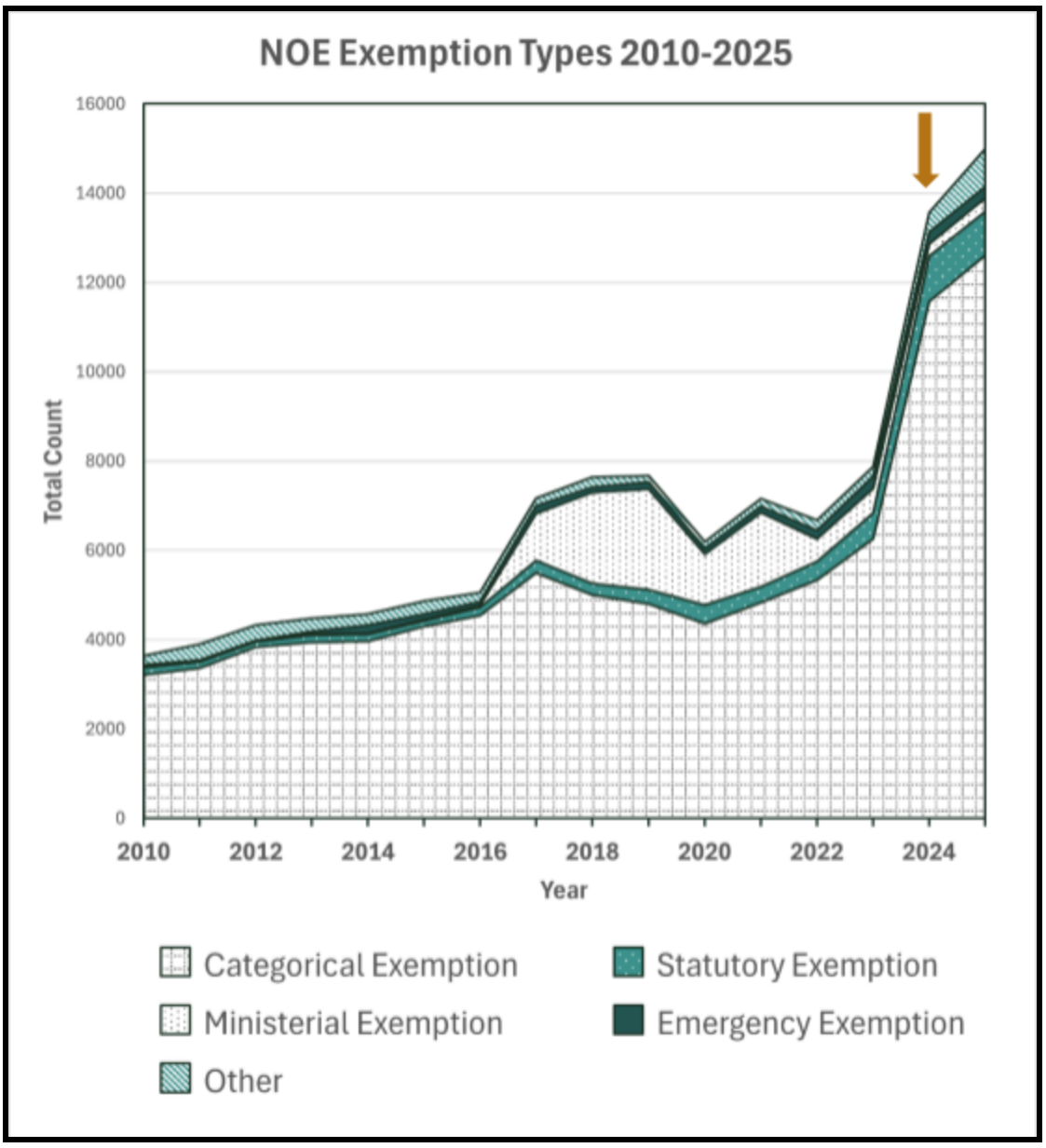
Categorical exemptions are by far the most commonly cited exemption types, accounting for about 80% of all NOEs. All other exemption types are cited tens to hundreds of times per year, except for statutory exemptions in 2024, which totaled over 1000 citations. Between 2017-2022, ministerial exemptions accounted for a significant portion of NOE citations.

The specific trends within categorical exemptions and use of recently codified statutory exemptions are described in the following sections.

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[14]"CalMatters, "Fire Map: Track California Wildfires 2025.""

Figure 2. Stacked area chart of total CEQAnet NOE filings 2010-2025 by exemption type. Vertical arrow indicates when SB 69 (2023) LCI filing requirement for NOEs began.



Categorical Exemptions

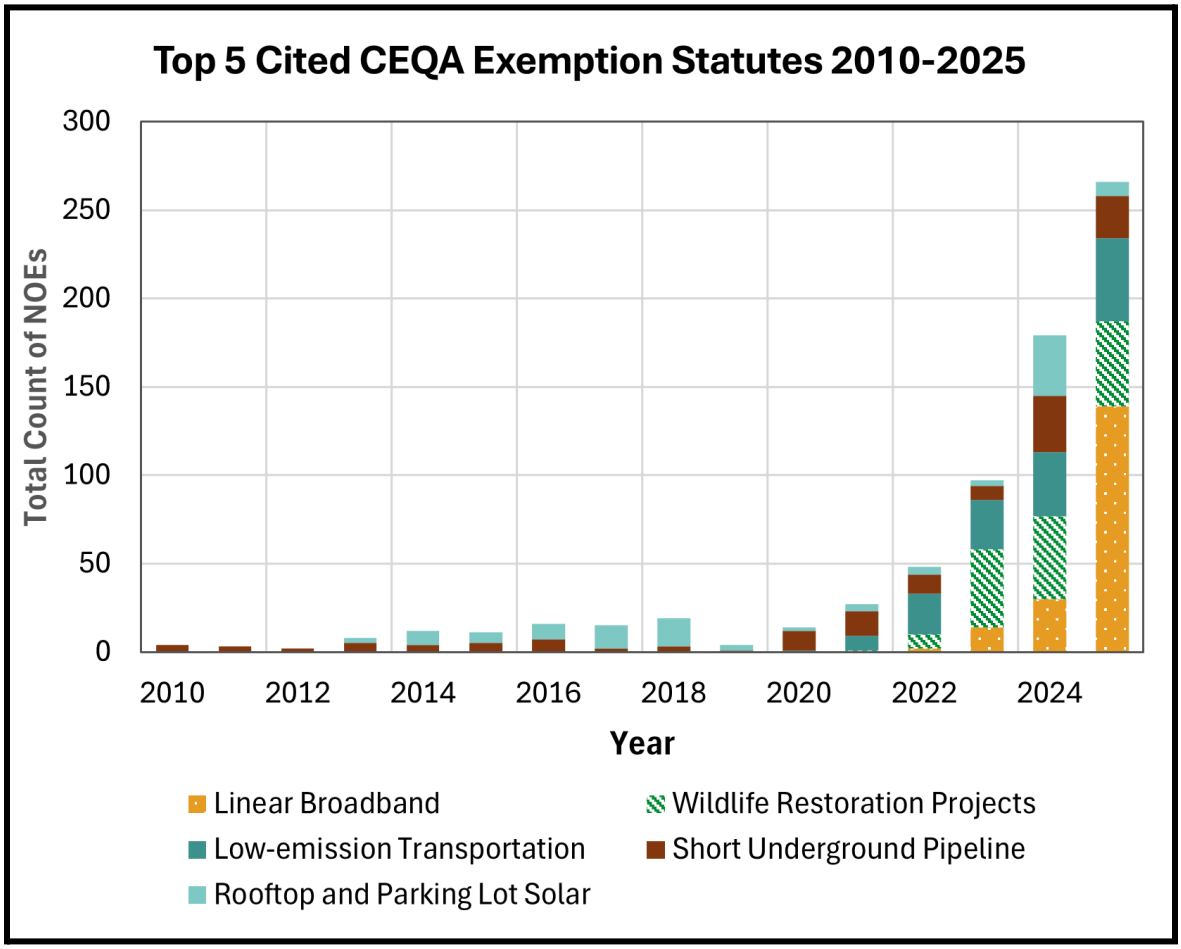
The most commonly cited categorical exemption is the Class 1 exemption for minor repair alterations to existing structures. The Class 1 exemption is also the single most applied CEQA exemption, representing about 40% of all NOE citations. The most cited categorical exemptions cover hundreds of routine projects with minimal environmental impacts carried out each year.

Table 3. Top 5 Cited Categorical Exemption Classes 2010-2025.

Class	California Code of Regulations Title 14 Article 19 Description (Abridged)	Citation Count
1	Operation, repair, maintenance, permitting, leasing, licensing, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use.	42,089
3	Construction and location of limited numbers of new, small facilities or structures; installation of small new equipment and facilities in small structures; and the conversion of existing small structures from one use to another where only minor modifications are made in the exterior of the structure.	8,799
4	Minor public or private alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes.	7,508
2	Replacement or reconstruction of existing structures and facilities where the new structure will be located on the same site as the structure replaced and will have substantially the same purpose and capacity as the structure replaced.	5,252
6	Basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.	3,049

Recently Legislated Statutory Exemptions

Figure 3. Top 5 Cited CEQA Exemption Statutes from 2010 through 2025



Agriculture and Forestry

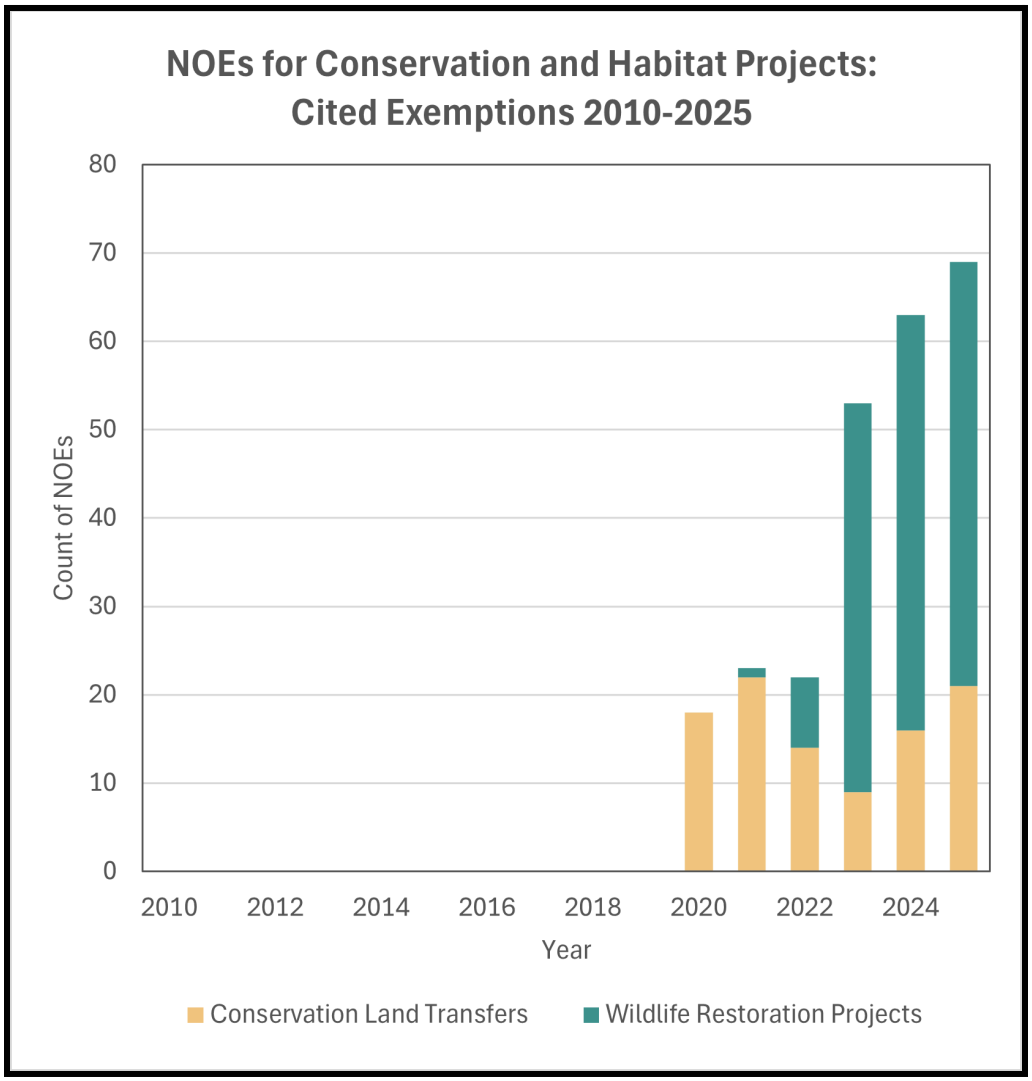
The California Business and Professions Code (BPC) 26055 was added by SB 94 (2017) as part of California's Medicinal and Adult-Use Cannabis Regulation and Safety Act (MAUCRSA). The statute exempts state cannabis licensing approvals and application requirements for commercial cannabis businesses. The CEQANet NOE database accounts for a total of 9 times between 2017 and 2022 that exemptions were filed. Filings were highest in 2018 (5 NOEs), followed by single filings in 2017, 2019, 2021, and 2022.

The use of this exemption reflects local or state actions connected to permitting cannabis cultivation, retail, manufacturing, or distribution facilities during the early rollout of California's regulated cannabis market after legalization. The concentration of filings in 2018 corresponds with the first full year of commercial licensing implementation under MAUCRSA.

Conservation/Habitat

PRC 21080.28 exemption was primarily used from 2020-2025 for land acquisition and conservation projects like habitat protection, easements, and agricultural preservation and park expansion. Use of the exemption peaked early after AB 782 (2020), dipping in 2023, and then rebounding in 2025. In contrast, PRC 21080.56 was expanded by SB 155 (2022) and extended by SB 174, and became dominant from 2023 onward as an exemption for active ecological restoration projects such as wetland and river restoration, and habitat enhancement, with steady annual filings of at least 48 NOEs from 2023-2025.

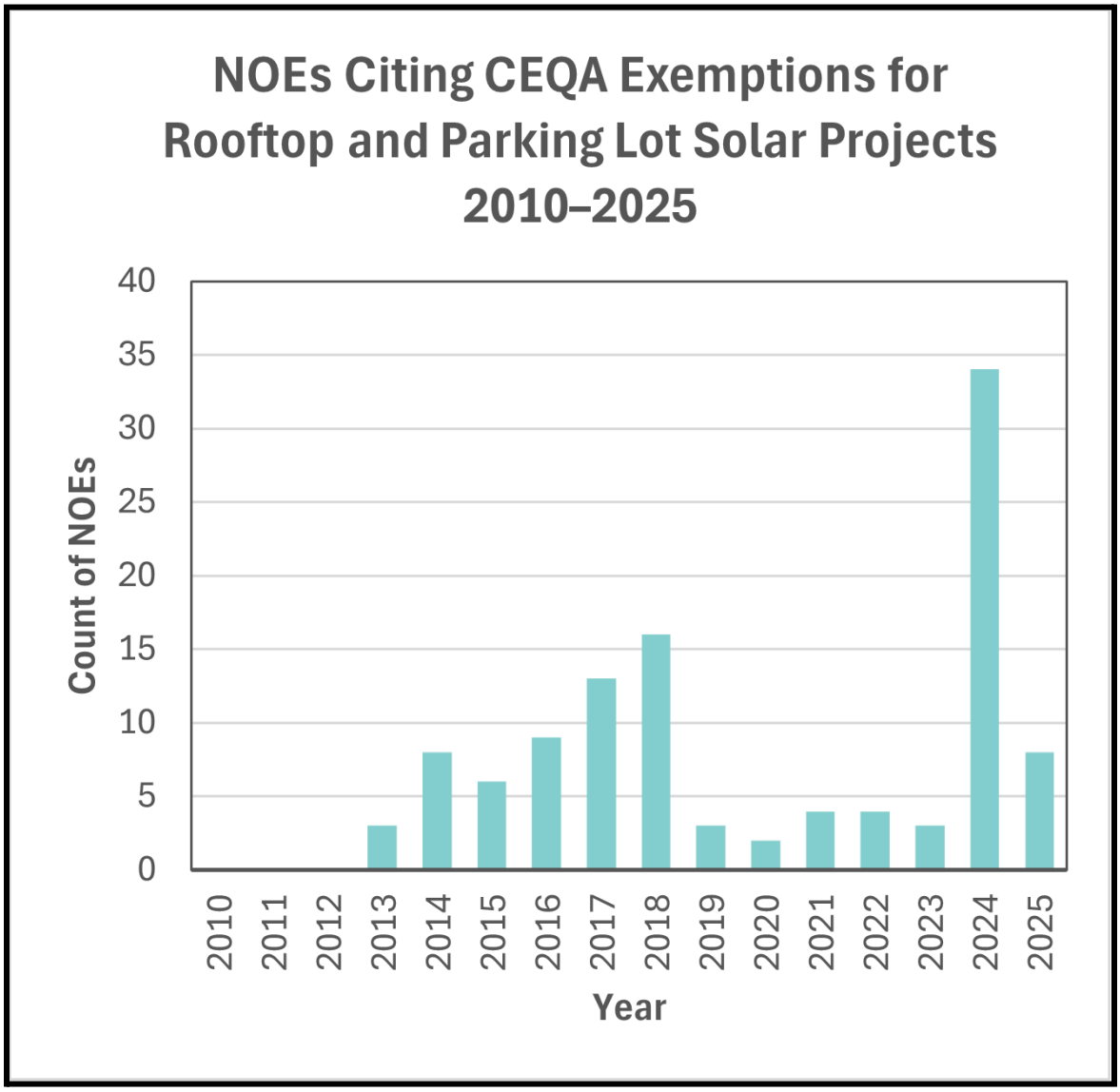
Figure 4. Cited CEQA Exemption Statutes from 2010 through 2025 for Conservation and Habitat Projects.



Energy

A single CEQA exemption for energy projects was cited 113 times. This statute provides CEQA exemption for solar energy installations over existing rooftops and parking lots and was added by SB 226 (2011). It was first cited in 2013, and this exemption has been cited every year since then. Very few NOEs citing this exemption were submitted 2019-2023. Citations peaked in 2024, with 34 NOEs, however, the total use is unclear prior to 2024 because there are no filing requirements for this CEQA exemption.

Figure 5. Cited CEQA Exemption Statutes from 2010 through 2025 for Rooftop and Parking Lot Solar Projects.



Housing

We can see clear growing trends regarding the use of housing CEQA exemptions from 2010 to 2025. This section will cover the housing CEQA exemptions that were applied more than 30 times. One interesting finding is that PRC § 21159.25 created by AB 1804 (2019) was applied a total of 42 times making it the most frequently used housing-related CEQA statutory exemption in the 2010-2025 dataset. This exemption was created to expedite the development of infill multi-family residential and multi-family mixed use housing projects in urbanized areas with low risks of environmental impacts.

The use of this exemption first began in 2019, was not used in 2020, and then was consistently used in subsequent years. This exemption was used the most during 2022 with a total use of 32 times. This is clearly shown in Figure 6 where this exemption code is shown in light blue representing, “Multi-Family Residential”. The high use of this exemption in 2022 coincides with the passing of a landmark housing legislation bill SB 10 (2021). SB 10 (2021) was created to rezone existing urban infill areas to be able to include up to 10 housing units in a single parcel and bypass lengthy environmental reviews. It’s possible that local governments used SB 10 (2021) to officially rezone parcels to higher densities to meet PRC § 21159.25’s minimum six residential unit requirement to be exempted from CEQA. Having this legislative housing bill fully operational could’ve proliferated the use of this exemption in the year 2022 during its highest level of use (32 NOEs). This is speculating on the idea that these provisions apply to the same parcels/projects.

The second most applied statutory exemption was PRC § 21080.17 with a total of 33 NOE filings from 2010 to 2025. This exemption was created to exempt city and county ordinances that proliferate the creation of accessory dwelling units or ADUs in single-family or multifamily residential zones by a city or a county.

Looking at figure 5 the use of this exemption first began in 2020 with a total of 3 filings it has been used consecutively since with its filings tripling in 2024 with a total of 10 uses and growing in 2025 at 13 uses. We can also see this gradual increase displayed in figure 6 where this exemption code is shown in teal representing “Additional Dwelling Ordinances”.

It’s interesting to note that prior to this exemption’s use in 2020, an important accessory dwelling unit bill SB 13 (2019) was enacted. This bill prevented local agencies from issuing impact fees for ADU projects, it limited local restrictions, and streamlined approvals for ADUs. SB 13 provided the foundation for streamlined ADU review and creation in 2019 and shortly after PRC § 21080.17 was amended by AB 3057(2025) to include junior accessory dwelling units into the local ordinance scope. This uptick in 2025 possibly provided by AB 3057 echoes California’s ongoing housing shortage dilemma. In California, 1 in 5 residential units being produced is an ADU and the NOE

filing trends are consistent with ADU and tiny home housing trend[15].

The third most applied statutory exemption was PRC § 21159.24 with a total of 31 NOE filings from 2010 to 2025. This exemption was created to streamline CEQA review for infill housing projects. Looking at figure 6, we can see the first appearance of this exemption in 2019 with only 1 NOE filing. This exempted code didn't get used again till 3 years later in 2022 where it received 30 NOE filings. This code has yet to receive any NOE filings since 2022.

Overall, when looking at Table 4, figure 5 and figure 6 we see consistent growing trends in CEQA statutory exemption housing NOEs. With some being supported by the legislature through complementary bills such as SB 10 (2021) that increased the amount of units allowed in urban parcels, SB 13 (2019) that reduced fees, restrictions, and streamlined processes, and AB 3057 (2025) that expanded the scope of zoning practices to include JADUs. These complementary bills are needed to expedite the creation of much needed Californian housing during a period of economic slowdowns.

Table 4. Top 6 Most Cited Statutory Exemptions for Housing during 2010-2025.

Ranking	Statutory Exemption	Total NOEs
1	PRC § 21159.25	42
2	PRC § 21080.17	33
3	PRC § 21159.24	31
4	PRC § 21080.66	18
5	GOV § 65913.4	14
6	GOV 65852.2	13

[15]Jane C. Hu, "A House with an 'Umbilical Cord'?," *The New York Times*

Figure 6. All Cited CEQA Exemption Statutes from 2010 through 2025 for Housing Projects

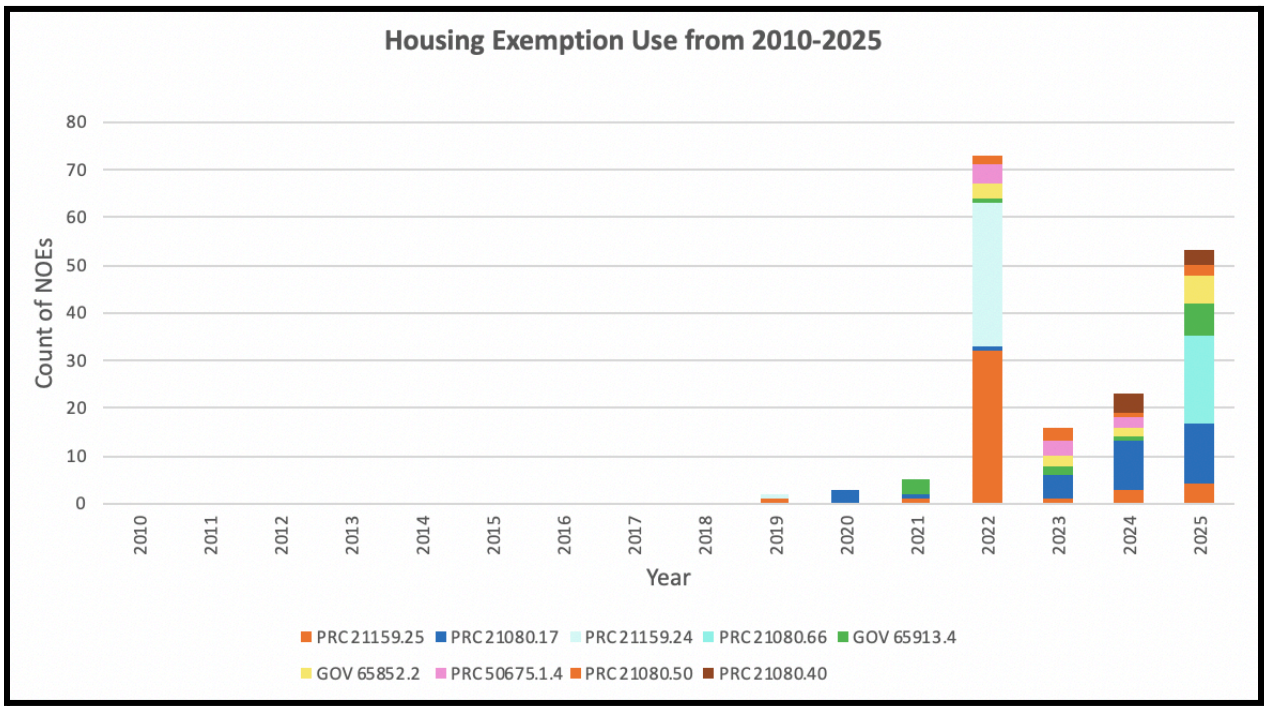
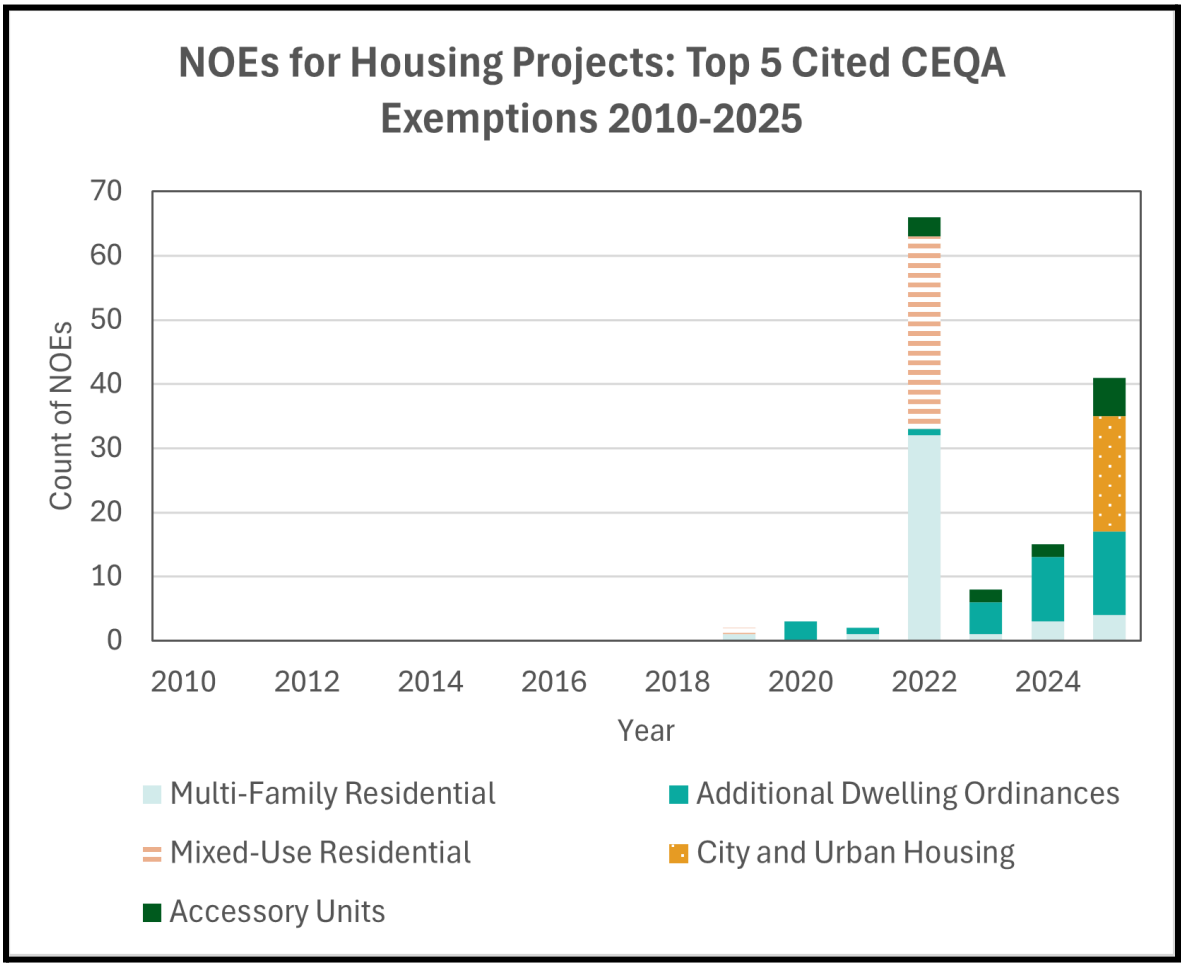


Figure 7. Top 5 Cited CEQA Exemption Statutes from 2010 through 2025 for Housing Projects



Land Use and Planning

One CEQA exemption for land use and planning projects was cited in recent NOEs. One exemption was created by SB 131 (2025) and provides CEQA exemptions for rezoning actions that implement an approved housing element. Because SB 131 was a budget trailer bill, it was enacted immediately as an urgency bill. The City of Los Altos Hills, City of Upland, Ventura County, City of Avalon, and City of South Pasadena were the first to apply this exemption within the last half of 2025 across eight NOE documents.

Mineral Resources

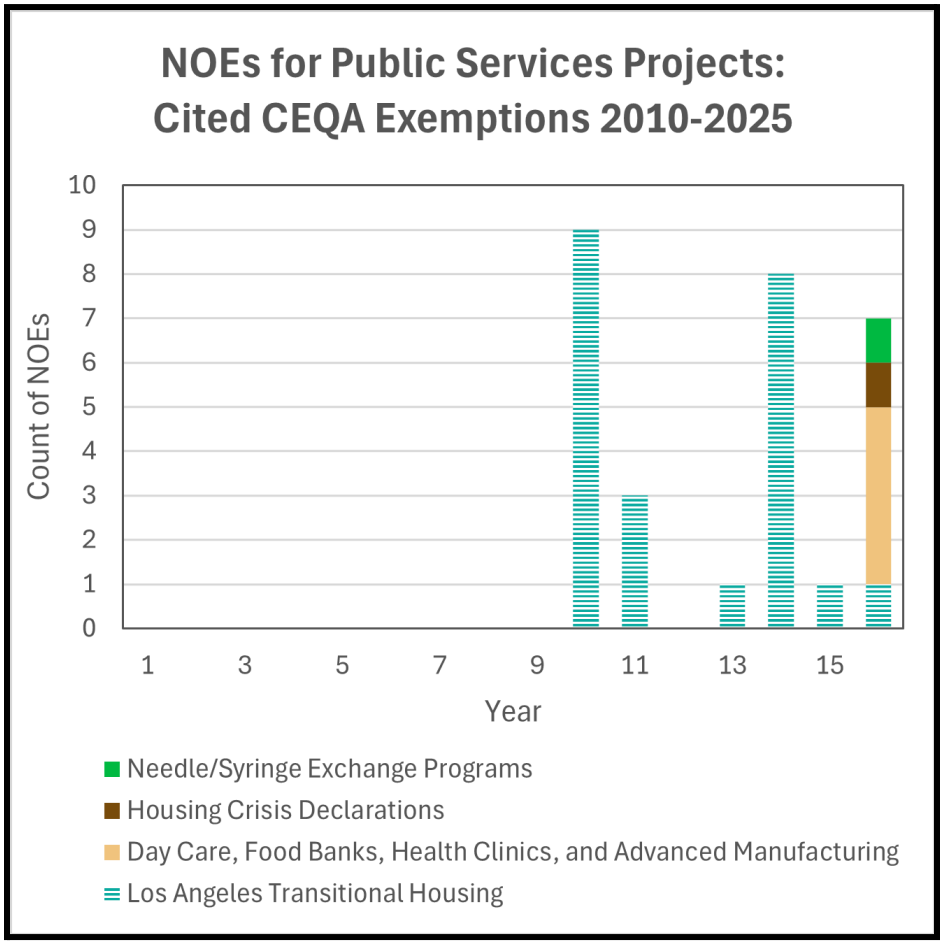
The exemption for interim surface mining plans was only cited once in the CEQAnet NOEs.

Public Services

CEQA exemptions for Public Services were cited 29 times from 2010-2025. Most of these projects cite an exemption for supportive, transitional, and emergency housing programs located in the City of Los Angeles and Los Angeles County. Exemption filings spiked in the years that the exemption for Los Angeles temporary housing was created, 2019, and amended, 2023, and it has been used a total of 23 times. Typical projects include temporary emergency housing in city parking lots and construction of 100% affordable housing.

The new SB 131 (2025) exemptions for day care centers and food banks had already been cited once each by the end of 2025. Two NOEs were submitted under the contentious “advanced manufacturing” exemption: a quantum computing research and development facility in Goleta, and a fusion energy research and development facility in Livermore. Other rarely cited public services exemptions include exemptions for housing crisis declarations and needle syringe programs.

Figure 8. Cited CEQA Exemption Statutes from 2010 through 2025 for Public Services Projects



Transportation

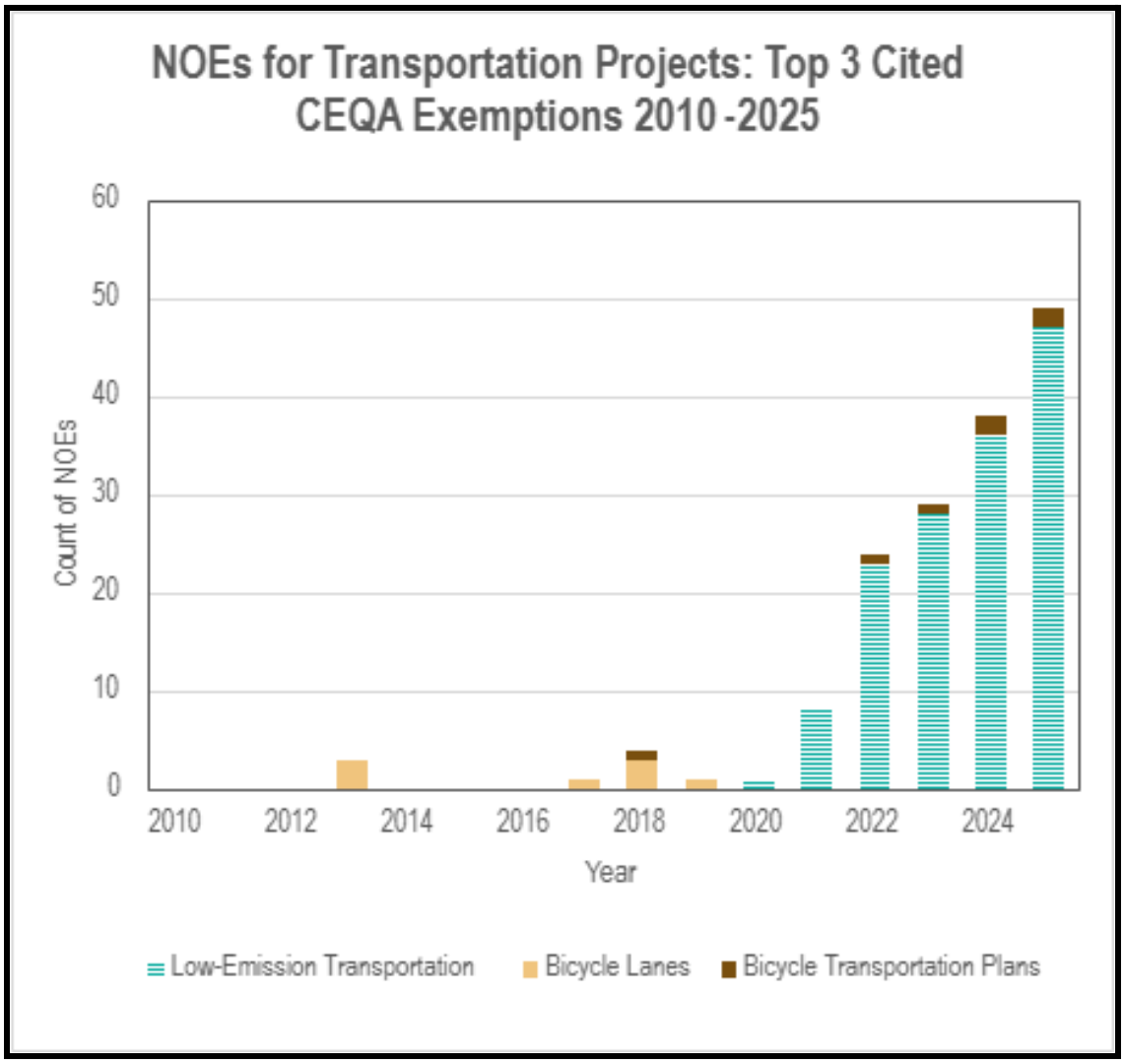
PRC 21080.25 was the most frequently cited transportation-related statutory exemption, with a total of 143 citations between 2020 and 2025. This exemption was created by SB 288 (2020) and was designed to streamline sustainable transportation projects like bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, transit improvements, and zero-emissions transit facilities. The citation frequency for this exemption grew from 1 citation in 2020 to 47 citations in 2025 which indicates a widespread adoption by local agencies. Later, the statute was expanded by SB 922 (2022) and amended again by SB 71 (2025) which reflects continued support for multimodal transportation streamlining under CEQA.

PRC 21080.20.5 was cited 8 times between 2013 and 2019, with no citations during 2019. This statute was created by AB 2245 (2012) and established a temporary CEQA exemption for the re-striping of existing streets and highways to add bicycle lanes in urban areas when it was consistent with an existing bicycle transportation plan. This exemption included procedural requirements like traffic and safety impacts, mitigation measures, public hearings, and notice filing requirements. Later amendments, AB 417 (2013) and AB 1218 (2017), modified and extended the exemption. However, this exemption's scope was narrow with complex procedures which likely contributed to its limited and declining use over time.

PRC 21080.20 was the third most cited transportation-related exemption, cited 7 times between 2018 and 2025. Instead of applying to physical infrastructure projects, it instead applies to transportation planning activities, including active transportation plans, pedestrian plans, and transit operational analyses. Unlike other broader transportation exemptions, 21080.20 focuses on planning-level action. Exemption use has been relatively limited, but citations have increased slightly as local agencies continue to expand active transportation and transit planning efforts.

PRC sections 21080.37, 21080.14, and 21080.70 were each only cited once and represent exemptions created for specific project types or public safety purposes. Unlike broader exemptions, these statutes apply to projects like minor roadway safety improvements, unsafe railroad crossing closures, and California high-speed rail facilities and station projects that have been evaluated in previous environmental impact reports. Each exemption includes detailed eligibility and procedural requirements like prior environmental reviews, public hearings, or NOE filing requirements. The use of these exemptions is limited, most likely due to its use on specific transportation and infrastructure projects.

Figure 9. Cited CEQA Exemption Statutes from 2010 through 2025 for Transportation Projects

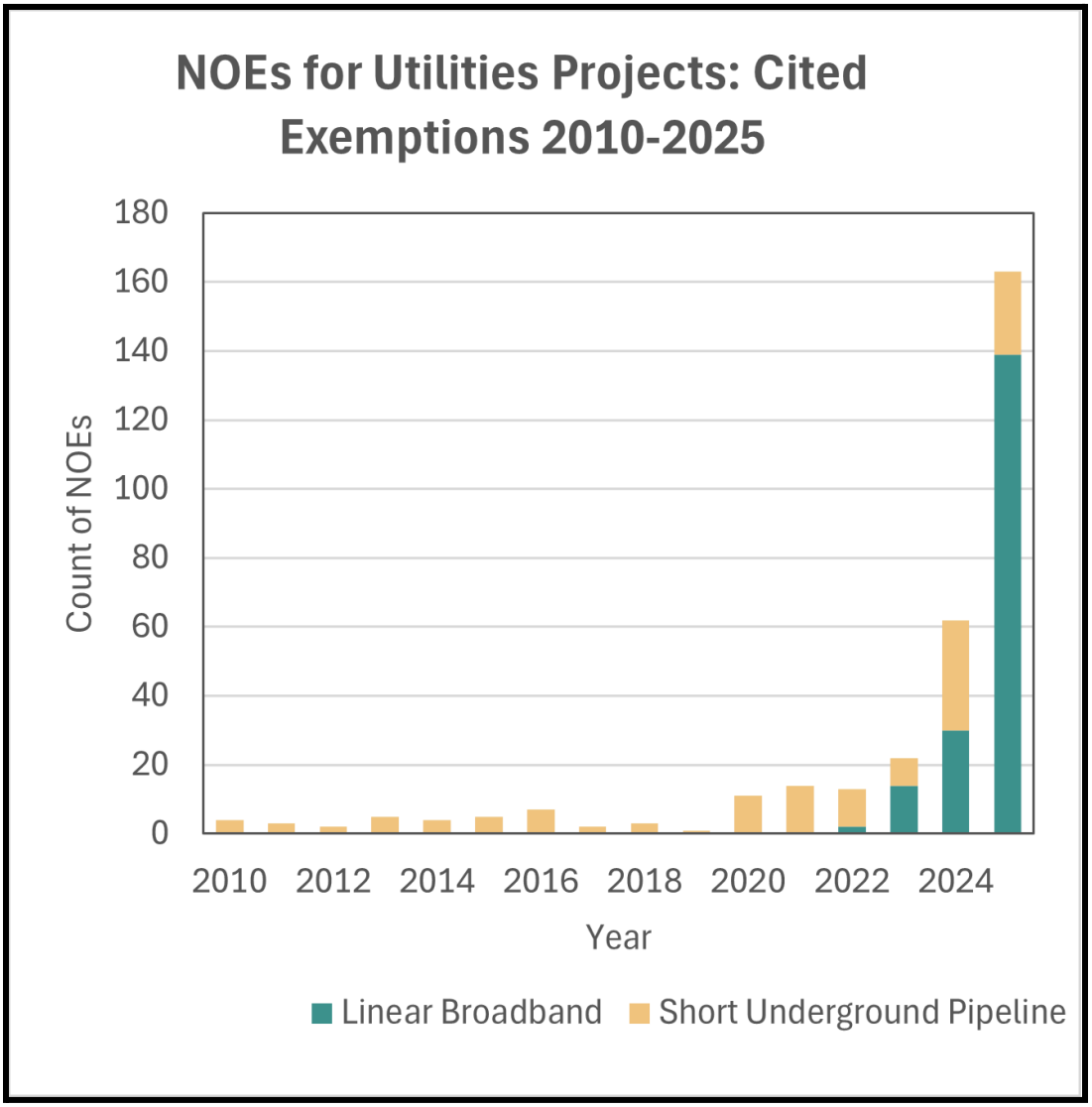


Utilities and Service Systems

Utilities and Services exemptions were the most commonly cited 2010-2025. This includes most cited CEQA exemption from our recent exemption legislation database, which exempts linear broadband deployment projects in and near an underground or aerial right-of-way. It has been used 185 times since it was created by SB 156 (2021) as part of a statewide program to increase internet connectivity and affordable access. 2025 represented a considerable ramp-up of linear broadband development from the previous years. However, it is possible that pre-2024 applications of this exemption were not filed with the state. A second highly utilized exemption for short underground pipeline installation or repair projects in the public right-of-way was cited 136 times and was used every year of our study period. Previous versions of the exemption statute

included a sunset date, though the current version does not have an expiration date, likely due to its regular use.

Figure 10. Cited CEQA Exemption Statutes from 2010 through 2025 for Utilities Projects



Water Systems

Water systems CEQA exemptions were rarely cited, which could represent a significant gap in infrastructure development. An exemption for small disadvantaged community water system projects and small state water system projects has been used only three times since it was created in 2021. These projects were located in Tulare and Calaveras Counties. Because filing an NOE with the state is required to apply this exemption, it is likely that this represents all of the projects that have used this CEQA exemption. A

CEQA exemption created by AB 3227 in 2024 for routine maintenance of stormwater facilities has also been cited three times. This exemption is targeted to more urban areas, and has been used in San Diego and the Santa Clara Valley Water District.

Wildfire

Following the enactment of SB 131 in 2025, PRC 21080.49 was quickly used for local wildfire mitigation projects. PRC 21080.49 was cited five times, primarily for projects creating defensible space and reducing hazardous vegetation near homes, critical infrastructure, and evacuation routes. Examples include Nevada County's Casci Roadside Fuel Break and Mendocino County's Orr Spring Road Project, which improved emergency access through reducing flammable vegetation, as well as projects in Morro Bay that established defensible space around structures to reduce wildfire risk. These exemptions show how local agencies immediately used SB 131 for community resilience and protection against wildfire.

Exemptions Not Cited

Ministerial exemptions were explicitly excluded in our study and not cited. Many of the exemptions that were modified in the last 15 years but did not show up in the CEQAnet NOEs were temporary exemptions, addressed emergency situations, or applied only to one or a few specific projects, including the Capitol Annex construction and . Others apply to state and local agency plans. For a full list, see Appendix XX

Discussion

Key Findings: Revealed Priorities

A few key exemption statutes were more heavily cited than others, specifically for linear broadband infrastructure, restoration projects, and low-emission transportation plans. The top three cited exemptions in these categories were all created in 2020 or later. However, a CEQA exemption alone does not guarantee that projects will be built. The linear broadband exemption is one piece of legislation within a larger policy program created by SB 156 (2021) to mobilize digital infrastructure projects and statewide internet connectivity. Along with CEQA exemption for linear broadband projects, SB 156 allocates $6 billion in funding for broadband projects and technical assistance provided by the California Public Utilities Commission[14]. Similarly, the wildlife habitat restoration exemption, known as Statutory Exemption for Restoration Projects (SERP), is implemented by a specific California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) staff working directly with restoration project teams and supported by the momentum of CNRA's Cutting the Green Tape Initiative and Governor Newsom's 2020 Nature-Based

[14] California PRC § 21080.51.

Solutions executive order[15]. The exemption for low-emissions transportation projects was created in 2020 and applies to a wide range of projects, including pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, public transit improvements, and traffic signal modifications and local planning related to parking space requirements.[16] The variety of transportation project types and scales covered by this single exemption statute may explain why it is so highly applied. The fourth and fifth most cited statutory exemption applies to short underground pipeline installation or maintenance and rooftop and parking lot solar energy projects, respectively. These exemptions are cited in relatively low numbers annually, but the consistent use of these exemptions has added up to significant total use over the 16 year analysis period. These two statutes have been in place for a relatively long time. A version of the underground pipeline exemption predates the analysis period, and the solar project exemption was created in 2011.

In recent years, Californians have been constrained due to stagnant wages, rising living costs, and housing shortages across the state. California ranks as one of the Nation's most expensive states to live in, and nine out of ten Californians consistently rank housing affordability as a problem.[17] This issue is only exacerbated when CEQA is used to delay and provide an opportunity to challenge projects through litigation battles. To combat this modern issue, there has been a wide array of additions and amendments to statutes to address this urgent issue affecting Californians. Some of these exemptions to CEQA were created to streamline the lengthy one to two year environmental review process and alleviate the current housing shortage epidemic.

Housing exemptions in general are highly cited, though the citations are spread across multiple statutes targeting specific forms of housing. Two CEQA exemptions for housing were highly cited in 2022, but rarely cited in subsequent years. Future research should examine why these exemptions for multifamily and mixed-use residential projects were so rarely used. In contrast, local governments are consistently applying the accessory dwelling unit (ADU) ordinance exemption. Exemptions for local government planning and land use policies are important because plans that change allowed development types, particularly housing developments, have been major targets for litigation, despite state mandates to update, modify, and align planning documents[18]. Interestingly, the exemption for ordinances related to rezoning and housing elements, categorized here under Land Use & Planning, was used almost immediately by five cities and one county after it went into effect in 2025. The Class 32 categorical exemption for infill residential development in cities has been labelled "underutilized" by CEQA scholars as recently as

[15] California Natural Resources Agency, "Cutting Green Tape."
[16] California PRC § 21080.25.
[17] Tobias, Manuela, Matt Levin, and Ben Christopher., "Here's Why California's Housing Costs Are so High."
[18] Hernandez, *In the Name of the Environment Part III: CEQA, Housing, and the Rule of Law*.

2022[19]. However, according to recent CEQAnet citations, use of Class 32 may be increasing, though data before 2024 is limited. We found that use of Class 32 is far higher than use of recent statutory exemptions for housing projects. In 2025 alone, Class 32 was cited 591 times, while all of the recently legislated housing exemptions have been cited 168 times total from 2010-2025. One of the housing exemptions in statute applies to multifamily housing in unincorporated areas[20], filling the gap left by Class 32[21]. Increasingly specific exemptions for housing projects may be less effective or present diminishing returns in encouraging new housing compared to promoting the use of exemptions that already exist.

Water supply resiliency and aging infrastructure are at the forefront of California's climate challenges,[22] but recent water infrastructure exemptions have rarely been cited in CEQAnet NOEs. The exemptions that have been cited are new exemptions created in 2021 and 2024 which apply to small state and "disadvantaged community" water systems[23] and stormwater system maintenance projects.[24] One CEQA exemption for community water projects is tied to Proposition 4 funding, but has not been cited at all in CEQAnet filings.

CEQA Exemptions Limit Community and Tribal Participation

The CEQA review process is one of few entry points through which the public can influence projects, shape outcomes for their communities, and pursue environmental justice or reduce environmental injustice[25]. At the same time, opportunities for public review and challenges from special interest groups can delay or halt projects that may be in the public interest or further statewide goals. Highly organized, well-funded groups may "abuse" the CEQA process.[26] Facing this tension, lawmakers enacted legislation to protect specific project types assumed to further state goals for energy transitions, transportation, housing, water resilience. Yet, all stages of CEQA, from exemption to review and litigation can be captured by private or special interests at the expense of public interest, and experts and advocates have been warning against legislation that weakens CEQA for decades[27]. Interest groups regularly come to the Legislature with proposals for CEQA exemptions for specific projects or project types, such as the City

[19] Robinson, *When a Statute Loses Its Way: Fulfilling the Original Intent of the California Environmental Quality Act*.
[20] PRC § 21159.25
[21] SCAG, "CEQA Categorical Exemptions."
[22] Public Policy Institute of California, "Priorities for California's Water."
[23] PRC § 21080.47
[24] PRC § 21080.61
[25] Smith-Heimer et al., "CEQA in the 21st Century."
[26] Robinson, *When a Statute Loses Its Way: Fulfilling the Original Intent of the California Environmental Quality Act*.
[27] Bass, "CEQA 1983: Alive! But How Well?"

of Industry Stadium, which received a specific statutory CEQA exemption but was never built.

Exemptions for private interests and industries severely limit opportunities for the public to engage with major development projects. Exemptions eliminate or weaken the crucial steps of disclosure and comment. How can CEQA protect the environment and provide a quality of life for Californians without understanding a full picture of environmental impacts of a project? CEQA comment periods and litigation have been important intervention points for Environmental Justice groups. The recent exemption for "advanced manufacturing" (PRC § 21080.69) undermines the ability of California communities to demand thorough consideration of a project's consequences because it is overly broad and is not directly linked to a specific public benefit or environmental goal. Lawmakers are currently attempting to rework this exemption through another statutory fix.[28]

NOE filings can be another point of public intervention/engagement.[29] With thousands of exemptions filed annually with LCI/OPR, the majority for minor projects, tracking and identifying the use of specific exemptions can be overwhelming. Communities and community advocates should be able to easily find and assess exemption notices, especially for exempted projects that may have environmental and health impacts.

When discussing CEQA exemptions, it's necessary to look into how tribal consultation is being addressed during this modern wave of exemption filings. It's important to note that the CEQA environmental impact review process warrants surveying from tribal consultants to find any culturally sensitive resources through AB 52 (2015). Some of these CEQA exemptions bypass the in-depth tribal consultation required by the CEQA process. Statutory exemptions such as PRC § 21080.66, added through AB 130 (2025) a sweeping housing trailer bill; routinely hold a requirement of tribal notification and invitation to consult. Categorical exemptions that are known to apply to smaller scale projects dealing with routine maintenance and alterations generally omit the usage of tribal participation. Whether these exemptions on existing facilities, small structures, and infill development is bypassing meaningful tribal consultation remains to be seen.

CEQA Exemptions Can Accelerate Infrastructure for Priority Populations

Some statutory exemptions target public services and infrastructure that support vulnerable or marginalized groups, including people in need of housing services, disadvantaged communities, and rural communities.[30] These exemptions can overlap in

[28] Reyes-Velarde, "Lawmakers Accidentally Blew a Hole in the State's Planning Law. Now, They're Trying to Fix It."
[29] Behles, "Why CEQA Exemption Decisions Need Additional Notice Requirements."
[30] GOV § 8698.4

purpose. For instance, one exemption applies to temporary shelters and transitional housing projects within Los Angeles County, while another statewide exemption streamlines the ability of local governments to allow shelters on public land. While necessary to meet current needs, some services may target symptoms rather than systemic roots. CEQA reform cannot address the roots of all social inequities and harms, but can reduce barriers to providing services to people in need. One statutory exemption (21080.25) for certain transportation projects with projected costs exceeding $1 million requires a racial equity analysis and a series of public meetings as a condition of exemption, and the purpose of the report is to identify equity impacts and suggest mitigation. Water systems exemptions addressing disadvantaged community water systems[31] and community water project projects funded through the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience Program and the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water (SADW) Fund[32] have rarely been cited in CEQAnet. SB 131 (2025) created new exemptions for rural healthcare, food banks, and day care centers. This analysis only included about 6 months of data during which these exemptions were active, but one food bank and one day care center project had already cited the new statute section.

Analysis of CEQAnet data for reviewed projects (EIRs, MNDs, NDs) has suggested that fewer infrastructure projects are sited in areas with a high proportion of people of color, high population density areas, and high pollution burdens, noting that the infrastructure projects tends to be beneficial infrastructure, such as parks, rather than major polluting infrastructure[33]. A similar analysis with NOE data may reveal disparities in exemption use.

CEQA exemptions can affect the types of housing built, where it is built and who it is built for.[34] High housing prices and rent have become an equity issue, leaving Californians in a housing crisis. Cost-burden and housing insecurity have disproportionately greater impact towards young people, elderly, people with disabilities, immigrants, Tribal population, people of color, and low income households[35]. The California Department of Housing and Community Development has identified eight factors that create housing crisis: historical segregation and exclusion particularly on the basis of race or ethnicity, local neighborhood resistance to change, regulatory hurdles such as CEQA, zoning that limits housing production, lagging federal support, financing limitations for affordable housing, high construction costs, expiration of affordable housing requirements[36]. CEQA exemption policies directly reduce the regulatory hurdles

[31] PRC § 21080.47
[32] PRC § 21080.48
[33] Wang et al., “Environmental Justice, Infrastructure Provisioning, and Environmental Impact Assessment.”
[34] Bertrand, “Proxy War: The Role of Recent CEQA Exemptions in Fixing California’s Housing Crisis.”
[35] California Department of Housing and Community Development, “2022 Statewide Housing Plan.”
[36] California Department of Housing and Community Development, “2022 Statewide Housing Plan.”

of CEQA, by going for pro-housing zoning changes, and provide a foundation for exempted projects to withstand local neighborhood resistance to change.

Limitations

Overall, this analysis illustrates a preliminary use of CEQAnet NOE filings as a policy evaluation tool. We encountered several limitations in developing this analysis. First, we elected to include only statutes modified 2010-2025 to easily apply publicly available information on legislative activity (AEP Guidelines). A similar analysis could be easily extended to all statutory exemptions within the text of CEQA and across other bodies of state law. Our analysis does not examine other CEQA streamlining laws or litigation patterns,because the study was focused on evaluating the use of statutory and categorical exemptions through NOEs. Additionally, we did not analyze CEQA litigation patterns, as doing so would need a separate methodology and dataset focused on legal challenges rather than the exemption usage. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents were excluded because federal environmental review processes operate under a distinct legal framework.

Our analysis does not trace the outcomes of exempted projects, and exempted projects range from small modifications to existing structures to large housing and infrastructure developments. Using the number of citations to evaluate and compare efficacy or usefulness of exemption statutes may not be suitable for all project types and does not reflect the quality or outcomes of projects. Because the exemption statute or regulations were sometimes poorly cited, and we did not manually review all NOEs, it is possible that there are errors in our accounting of exemption use.

Our analysis uses only the data available from CEQAnet, and this database has incomplete NOE filings. While some exemptions require filing of NOE documents with county clerk offices and LCI/OPR, filing NOEs is generally not mandatory.[37] There is a strong incentive to file NOEs to enter a shorter public review period, 35 days compared to 180 days for non-filed exemptions, so we expect most exemption use is filed. The incentive to file notices is likely stronger for projects with more potential to have impacts or more local pushback. Before 2024, local lead agencies and applicants could submit NOEs to counties without submitting to the state. Starting in 2024, all NOEs filed with county offices must also be filed with LCI. With these requirements, CEQAnet is a much more powerful policy analysis tool for tracking exemptions. However, the data prior to 2024 is likely missing a large portion of NOEs filed with county clerk offices only.

[37] LII Leg. Inf. Inst., “Cal. Code Regs. Tit. 14, § 15062 - Notice of Exemption”; Behles, “Why CEQA Exemption Decisions Need Additional Notice Requirements.”

Concluding Recommendations

NOE data can be important for tracking the use of exemptions, but the data limitations mean we cannot draw strong conclusions regarding exemption use and efficacy of specific exemptions. Instead, the following recommendations propose practices that can support disclosure of exemption use and call for continued and deeper investigations into the downstream effects and impacts of exemption use. The most recent major CEQA reform was in 2025 (went into effect July 2025), leaving only about 5-6 months for use of these exemptions during our analysis period. Application of these exemptions will need to be tracked and evaluated in the coming years.

1. **Standardize CEQAnet NOE Citation Entry:** LCI should consider using data-validation, a set list of citations to select, in NOE submission forms and provide example citation guidelines specifying how to reference statute and regulation codes. The guidelines should standardize the use of code abbreviations, section numbering for citations, and subsection references. Improved guidance to agencies will help avoid citations that are overly broad, noting when subsections should be cited, and keep the same consistent formatting for all agencies. Additionally, clear state guidance is important to assist entities that had previously only filed notice with county offices.

2. **Make the CEQAnet Database Searchable by Exemption Citation**: Once the exemption citation data is standardized, future entries should be searchable by citation. Policy analysts, government officials, researchers, and community advocates should be able to easily track how these policies are used. Doing so will allow tracking of the efficacy of exemption policies, enable public review of filed exemption decisions, and provide government planners and officials an accessible repository of projects that align with each exemption.

3. **Ensure CEQA exemptions statutes are complementary to statewide goals:** Some of the most applied statutory exemptions, such as the linear broadband deployment and the Statutory Exemption for Restoration Projects, exist within agency and legislative initiatives to mobilize internet connectivity and habitat restoration projects that come with funding and technical assistance. Exemptions alone cannot accelerate development toward California's goals. If the intention of statutory exemptions is to expedite development for certain priority projects, legislative and agency efforts should address barriers to project development in addition to CEQA burdens, such as funding and capacity constraints. Future exemption legislation should consider the characteristics shared by the most frequently used exemptions. Repeating these characteristics may improve the effectiveness and transparency of future CEQA streamlining efforts.

4. **Evaluate Housing Exemption Outcomes:** Housing-related exemptions represented the largest category of CEQA exemption legislation between 2010 to 2025 and were among the most frequently cited statutory exemptions in NOE filings. Future research should evaluate whether these exemptions are resulting in a measurable increase in housing production, affordability, project delivery speed, or other intended policy outcomes. Since California continues to rely on CEQA streamlining as a housing strategy, ongoing monitoring of housing exemption outcomes will help policymakers see which approaches are most effective and whether additional legislative changes are needed.

5. **Clean up and track the recent CEQA exemption for advanced manufacturing:** Link the project definitions and requirements in exemption language to specific state goals, rather than using overly broad language. If this exemption remains in place, it should require filing notice of exemption. Because some exemption statutes include multiple exemptions, section citations alone do not always show what specific provision is being cited. PRC § 21080.69 SB 131 (2025) is perhaps the most extreme example - four very different types of projects, within a single statute. When the negative environmental outcomes of an exemption are uncertain, the Legislature should include sunset provisions in bill language. Sunset dates can serve as a natural time for investigations into exemption use, efficacy, and consequences. Additionally, the LCI should establish a process to periodically review exemptions that received little or no documented use. While low utilization does not necessarily mean an exemption lacks values, exemptions that remain widely unused over years may cause evaluation to determine whether they continue to address an active policy need, should be revised, consolidated or allowed to expire.

6. **Track exemption use and evaluate exemption outcomes:** Barriers, unintended negative impacts and a review of who is using exemptions, and for what types of projects? Other studies have examined CEQA review, approvals, or litigation.[38,39,40,41] A full analysis of how CEQA influences project progress needs to account for exemptions as well.

[38] Hernandez, *In the Name of the Environment Part III: CEQA, Housing, and the Rule of Law*.
[39] Adams and Pettit, *CEQA – The Litigation Myth*.
[40] Smith-Heimer et al., “CEQA in the 21st Century.”
[41] Smith-Heimer and Hitchcock, “CEQA and Housing.”

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Appendices

CEQA Exemption Statutes Amended and Added 2010-2025

Categorical Exemption Class Descriptions

Class	Exemption Title	California Code of Regulations Title 14 Article 19 Description (Abridged)
1	Existing Facilities	Operation, repair, maintenance, permitting, leasing, licensing, or minor alteration of existing public or private structures, facilities, mechanical equipment, or topographical features, involving negligible or no expansion of existing or former use.
2	Replacement or Reconstructions	Replacement or reconstruction of existing structures and facilities where the new structure will be located on the same site as the structure replaced and will have substantially the same purpose and capacity as the structure replaced.
3	New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures	Construction and location of limited numbers of new, small facilities or structures; installation of small new equipment and facilities in small structures; and the conversion of existing small structures from one use to another where only minor modifications are made in the exterior of the structure.

4	Minor Alterations to Land	Minor public or private alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees except for forestry or agricultural purposes.
5	Minor Alterations to Land Use Limitations	Minor alterations in land use limitations in areas with an average slope of less than 20%, which do not result in any changes in land use or density.
6	Information Collection	Basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.
7	Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of Natural Resources	Actions taken by regulatory agencies as authorized by state law or local ordinance to assure the maintenance, restoration, or enhancement of a natural resource where the regulatory process involves procedures for protection of the environment.
8	Actions by Regulatory Agencies for Protection of the Environment	Actions taken by regulatory agencies, as authorized by state or local ordinance, to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of the environment where the regulatory process involves procedures for protection of the environment.
9	Inspections	Activities limited entirely to inspections, to check for performance of an operation, or quality, health, or safety of a project, including related activities such as inspection for possible mislabeling, misrepresentation, or adulteration of products.
10	Loans	Loans made by the Department of Veterans Affairs under the Veterans Farm and Home Purchase Act of 1943, mortgages for the purchase of existing structures where the loan will not be used for new construction and the purchase of such mortgages by financial institutions.
11	Accessory Structures	Construction, or placement of minor structures accessory to (appurtenant to) existing commercial, industrial, or institutional facilities.

12	Surplus Government Property Sales	Sales of surplus government property except for parcels of land located in an area of statewide, regional, or areawide concern identified in Section 15206(b)(4). However, even if the surplus property to be sold is located in any of those areas, its sale is exempt if certain conditions are met.
13	Acquisition of Lands for Wildlife Conservation Purposes	Acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation purposes including (a) preservation of fish and wildlife habitat, (b) establishing ecological reserves under Fish and Game Code Section 1580, and (c) preserving access to public lands and waters where the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition.
14	Minor Additions to Schools	minor additions to existing schools within existing school grounds where the addition does not increase original student capacity by more than 25% or ten classrooms, whichever is less.
15	Minor Land Divisions	Division of property in urbanized areas zoned for residential, commercial, or industrial use into four or fewer parcels under certain conditions.
16	Transfers of Ownership of Land in Order to Create Parks	Acquisition, sale, or other transfer of land in order to establish a park where the land is in a natural condition or contains historical or archaeological resources.
17	Open Space Contracts or Easements	Establishment of agricultural preserves, the making and renewing of open space contracts under the Williamson Act, or the acceptance of easements or fee interests in order to maintain the open space character of the area.
18	Designation of Wilderness Areas	Designation wilderness areas under the California Wilderness System.
19	Annexations of Existing Facilities and Lots for Exempt Facilities	
20	Changes in Organization of Local Agencies	Changes in the organization or reorganization of local governmental agencies where the changes

		do not change the geographical area in which previously existing powers are exercised.
21	Enforcement Actions by Regulatory Agencies	Actions by regulatory agencies to enforce or revoke a lease, permit, license, certificate, or other entitlement for use and law enforcement activities by peace officers acting under any law that provides a criminal sanction.
22	Educational or Training Programs Involving No Physical Changes	Adoption, alteration, or termination of educational or training programs which involve no physical alteration in the area affected or which involve physical changes only in the interior of existing school or training structures.
23	Normal Operations of Facilities for Public Gatherings	Normal operations of existing facilities for public gatherings for which the facilities were designed, where there is a past history of the facility being used for the same or similar kind of purpose.
24	Regulations of Working Conditions	actions taken by regulatory agencies, including the Industrial Welfare Commission as authorized by statute, to regulate working conditions.
25	Transfers of Ownership of Interest in Land to Preserve Existing Natural Conditions and Historical Resources	Transfers of ownership of interests in land in order to preserve open space, habitat, or historical resources.
26	Acquisition of Housing for Housing Assistance Programs	Actions by a redevelopment agency, housing authority, or other public agency to implement an adopted Housing Assistance Plan by acquiring an interest in housing units.
27	Leasing New Facilities	Leasing of a newly constructed or previously unoccupied privately owned facility by a local or state agency where the local governing authority determined that the building was exempt from CEQA.
28	Small Hydroelectric Projects at Existing Facilities	Installation of small hydroelectric generating facilities in connection with existing dams, canals, and pipelines that will not impact flow, habitat, or other environmental conditions.

29	Cogeneration Projects at Existing Facilities	Installation of cogeneration equipment with a capacity of 50 megawatts or less at existing facilities meeting the specified conditions.
30	Minor Actions to Prevent, Minimize, Stabilize, Mitigate or Eliminate the Release or Threat of Release of Hazardous Waste or Hazardous Substances	Any minor cleanup actions taken to prevent, minimize, stabilize, mitigate, or eliminate the release or threat of release of a hazardous waste or substance which are small or medium removal actions costing $1 million or less.
31	Historical Resource Restoration/Rehabilitation	Projects limited to maintenance, repair, stabilization, rehabilitation, restoration, preservation, conservation or reconstruction of historical resources.
32	In-fill Development Projects	Projects characterized as in-fill development within city limits that are consistent with planning and zoning designations and meet specified requirements.
33	Small Habitat Restoration Projects	Projects not to exceed five acres in size to assure the maintenance, restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife and meet the specified conditions.

Legislative Exemption Database Entry Example

Bill Number	Year In Effect	Bill Year	Chapter #	Author	Exemption Type	Code Section	Brief Summary
SB 674	2015	2014	549	Corbett	Statutory Exemption	21159.24	

Description

This table serves as an example of the dense Legislative Exemption Database that was routinely referenced throughout the report. The following table only includes 8 of the 20 columns that were used to sort and organize CEQA exemptions bills recorded in the CEQA AEP guidebooks from 2010 to 2025. Information ranged from short numerical

values for bill number, year in effect, bill year, chapter #, code section, to brief descriptions of the author, exemption type, to a longer plain language summary of an exemption.

Handouts