

ALERT

Women's Leadership Forum & Reception

Attendees Celebrate Links, Look to Future Success

The connections, hard work and mutual support behind the success of women leaders were on display this week at the second annual Women's Leadership Forum & Reception presented by the California Chamber of Commerce.

The March 3 gathering was punctuated by applause, laughter, hugs and tears as the featured speakers shared their stories of how they reached their positions of leadership and influence.

Women's Leadership Council Chair Raji K. Brar opened the program with the

reminder that CalChamber President and CEO Jennifer Barrera is the first woman to hold that post.

Brar went on to note that in California, the fourth largest economy in the world, 40% of businesses are owned by women, as reported in the [University of Southern California study](#) commissioned by the council last year.

"Women are building companies, creating jobs and strengthening communities across our state," Brar said.

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Barrera Joins State Water Plan Committee



CalChamber President and CEO Jennifer Barrera has joined a state advisory panel

to help shape a new, multi-year water plan for California — a plan that will provide both clear water supply targets and benchmarks to ensure both action and accountability.

Gov. Gavin Newsom [announced the launch of the California Water Plan 2028](#) and the stakeholder advisory committee on Feb. 25.

Meetings attended by Barrera and the other members of the panel will be convened by the state Department of Water Resources for public meetings beginning in April.

"It's an honor to participate in discussions that will help set the course for California's long-term prosperity," Barrera said. "Few issues are as vital as ensuring that we have the water needed to keep our communities strong and our economy growing."

The formal kickoff of the California Water Plan 2028 sets into motion the first phase of a focused, multi-year effort to modernize the state's water planning process. Under last year's Senate Bill 72, the state will work towards a target of 9 million acre-feet of water supply by 2040. (A single acre foot of water — what would be needed to cover an acre of surface area with one foot of water —

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Photo by Lisa Nottingham

At the CalChamber Women's Leadership Forum & Reception on March 3 are (from left) Cassandra Pye, president, Lucas Public Affairs; Raji K. Brar, COO of Countryside Corporation and chair of the Women's Leadership Council; Assembly Majority Leader Cecilia Aguiar-Curry; Donna L. Lucas, CEO and Founder, Lucas Public Affairs, and inaugural chair of the Council; and Jillian Pinney, founder and president, Chix Cabinets Direct, Inc.

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Labor Law Corner

Don't Assume Workers in Similar Jobs Will Be Exempt from Wage Order



Matthew Roberts
Associate General
Counsel

We employ several workers in a similar job role at our organization. If we determine that one of the employees satisfies an exemption from the California wage order covering our industry, can we make all workers in that role automatically exempt from the wage order?

California wage orders provide several tests to classify workers as exempt from the requirements of the wage order such as paying the workers

a minimum wage, overtime or providing meal and rest breaks.

'White-Collar' Exemptions

The most common exemptions in the wage orders are the executive, administrative and professional exemptions. These exemptions are known collectively as the "white-collar" exemptions.

Salary Test

In order to classify a worker as exempt from the wage order requirements, an employer must show that the work is paid a predetermined salary of at least two times the applicable statewide minimum wage.

For 2026, this is \$70,304 for most industries. This amount can't be offset by indeterminate sources of compensation such as commissions and bonuses.

Work Duties Test

In addition to this salary requirement, the worker also must satisfy the

work duties test for the exemption. Each "white-collar" exemption has a unique duties test.

For example, among other requirements, the executive exemption requires the worker to supervise at least two other workers, while the professional exemption requires licensure or certification from the state of California in specific fields identified in the wage order such as law, medicine, engineering and teaching, among other unique requirements.

Shared Requirements

Although each of the exemptions has unique job duties tests, all share a few requirements:

- The worker must be primarily engaged in those exempt job duties for the exemption — in other words, more than 50% of their workweek must be devoted to performing exempt duties; and
- The worker must be able to exercise

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CalChamber-Sponsored Seminars/Trade Shows

More information at www.calchamber.com.
Human Resources

Navigating Paid Sick Leave & Time Off Requests in California. March 19, [Webinar](#). (800) 331-8877.

Leaves of Absence. CalChamber. March 26–27, May 7–8, August 6–7, [Virtual Seminar](#). (800) 331-8877.

Workplace Violence Prevention Program Tips for 2026. CalChamber. April 16, [Webinar](#). (800) 331-8877.

HR Boot Camp. CalChamber. April 23–24, June 4–5, September 10–11, [Virtual Seminar](#). (800) 331-8877.

Wage & Hour 101: Nonexempt/Hourly Employees. CalChamber. May 21, [Webinar](#). (800) 331-8877.

Wage & Hour 101: Exempt Employees. CalChamber. June 18, [Webinar](#). (800) 331-8877.

Supervisor Essentials. CalChamber, July 16, [Virtual Seminar](#). (800) 331-8877.

Conducting California Workplace Investigations. CalChamber. August 27, [Virtual Seminar](#). (800) 331-8877.

Simplifying Local Ordinances: Helpful Resources for California Employers. CalChamber. [Webinar recording](#). (800) 331-8877.

2026 Employment Law Updates.

CalChamber. [Webinar recording](#). (800) 331-8877.

International Trade

Agriculture Tech in South Africa, Export Training. Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz) and Zurcom International. February 19–May 7, [Virtual](#).

Chile FIDAE Airshow: California Pavilion. GO-Biz. April 7–12, Santiago, Chile. [See flyer](#). Diana.Dominguez@gobiz.ca.gov.

EXIM Annual Conference. Export-Import Bank of the United States. April 29–30, Washington, D.C. [Conference website](#).

The World in Motion: Advancing Sports Tourism on a Global Stage. Inland Empire World Trade Conference Committee and San Bernardino Inter-
See CalChamber-Sponsored: Page 3

CalChamber Calendar

Board of Directors:

March 12–13, Half Moon Bay

International Trade Breakfast:

March 13, Half Moon Bay

CSU Bakersfield Names CalChamber President to Alumni Hall of Fame



CalChamber President and CEO Jennifer Barrera was inducted into the California State University, Bakersfield Alumni Hall of Fame last week. With Barrera (second from right) at the February 26 awards ceremony are (from left) CalChamber Board members Jennifer Haley (Kern Energy); Raji K. Brar (Country-side Corporation); Board President Maryam S. Brown (SoCal Gas); and Seth Oster (The Wonderful Company). See the [CSU Bakerfield profile of Barrera](#).

Don't Assume Workers in Similar Jobs Will Be Exempt from Wage Order

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discretion and independent judgment in the performance of their duties.

Because job titles and job similarities are not part of the exempt employee tests, employers can't assume that if one worker meets the exemption then all similar workers would as well. Each worker who is classified as exempt must individually meet the exemption tests.

For example, there may be situations where some similar workers spend more or less time on their exempt job duties that may help or hinder meeting the requirement that exempt workers are primarily engaged in exempt job duties.

Further, while job duties may be similar, they may not be exactly the same.

If the job duties don't measure up to the required level of discretion and independent judgment, the worker may not be exempt.

Other Exemptions

In addition to the "white-collar" exemptions, there are four others employers use to classify workers as exempt from wage order requirements:

- Computer professional;
- Licensed physician or surgeon;
- Outside salesperson; and
- Commissioned inside sales employee (Wage Orders 4 and 7 only).

Each of these exemptions is tailored more narrowly to specific jobs, but each contains its own requirements that

employers should review before utilizing these exemptions similar to "white-collar" exemptions.

As with the "white-collar" exemptions, when two or more workers are doing similar jobs, all the workers may not necessarily be exempt from the wage order. Employers must review each worker's duties individually to ensure the role satisfies all requirements of the chosen exemption.

Column based on questions asked by callers on the Labor Law Helpline, a service to California Chamber of Commerce preferred members and above. For expert explanations of labor laws and Cal/OSHA regulations, not legal counsel for specific situations, call (800) 348-2262 or submit your question at www.hrcalifornia.com.

CalChamber-Sponsored Seminars/Trade Shows

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national Airport. May 1, Highland. [Get tickets](#).

SelectUSA Investment Summit. Select USA. May 3–6, National Harbor, Maryland. [Event website](#).

NADEC Annual Export Conference: Global Trade in Transition. National Association of District Export Councils. May 12–13, Nashville, Tennessee. [Event website](#).

BeautyWorld Saudi Arabia: California

Pavilion. GO-Biz. May 18–20. [See flyer](#). Tricia.Utterback@gobiz.ca.gov.

Asia Tech x Singapore: California Pavilion. GO-Biz. May 20–22, Singapore. [Learn more](#).

Sri Lanka Expo 2026. Sri Lanka Export Development Board. June 18–21, Sri Lanka. [Event website](#).

Farnborough Airshow. GO-Biz to lead delegation of economic developers. July 20–24, London, United Kingdom. [Event website](#).

Semicon Taiwan: California Pavilion.

GO-Biz. September 1–4, Taipei, Taiwan. Up to 8 California small businesses in semiconductor supply chain invited to apply. [See flyer](#).

Aquatech: California Pavilion. GO-Biz with U.S. Commercial Service. September 1–3, Mexico City, Mexico. Registration deadline: June 1 or until spaces are filled. [See flyer](#).

Cal/OSHA Releases Proposed Workplace Inspection ‘Walkaround’ Rule



The California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) recently published a

[proposed rule](#) broadly defining who may accompany Cal/OSHA representatives during workplace safety inspections. Cal/OSHA will accept written comments on this proposed rule through April 1, 2026, and will host a public hearing on that day.

This proposed rule follows a similar [federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\) rule](#) that went into effect in 2024. This federal rule is important because California, as a state that maintains its own OSHA plan, must adopt rules that are “at least as effective” as any federal standard, though it can also adopt rules that are more stringent than federal standards.

Under current California law, Cal/OSHA may inspect worksites for safety and health reasons. California Labor Code Section 6314 gives both a representative of the employer and a representative authorized by the employees the opportunity to accompany the inspector.

The Labor Code, however, doesn’t specifically define who qualifies as

an authorized representative of the employees for this purpose. Cal/OSHA’s proposed rule addresses that issue and others. While it generally parallels the federal rule, it has some differences.

Proposed Rule

The proposed rule would allow both employer- and employee-authorized representatives to accompany Cal/OSHA during inspections and specifies that the representative authorized by the employees may be:

- An employee;
- A third party; or
- The collective bargaining representative.

Cal/OSHA inspectors would have the ability to limit employer and employee representative involvement in the inspection. The proposed rule also would provide trade secret protections, providing that employers may require that an employee-authorized representative entering an area containing trade secrets be an employee in that area or someone authorized by the company to be in that area.

If there is no such employee or representative, the inspector must consult directly with employees working in that area.

Difference from Federal Rule

There is a notable difference between the proposed state rule and the federal standard. Like the current federal rule, Cal/OSHA’s rule provides that when the employee representative is a third party, they may accompany Cal/OSHA if “their participation is reasonably necessary to the conduct of an effective and thorough physical inspection of the workplace” due to, for example, their knowledge, skills or experience with hazards or other workplace conditions.

Unlike the federal rule, however, the proposed Cal/OSHA rule exempts collective bargaining representatives from this requirement. According to Cal/OSHA’s [Initial Statement of Reasons](#) for the proposed rule, the employee’s union representative is “assumed to have the necessary knowledge and experience of the workforce and workplace, as well as the ability to communicate with employees about workplace matters.”

Comments by April 1

California employers should carefully review [the proposed rule](#) and consult with legal counsel on its potential impact on their workplaces. Employers that want to submit comments on the proposed rule must do so by April 1, 2026.

Staff Contact: James Ward

Women’s Council Funds Scholarships for Future Women Leaders



Scholarships to support future women leaders of California will grow thanks

to \$50,000 raised through the CalChamber Women’s Leadership Council.

The funding for the Minerva Scholarship program was announced on March 3 at the Women’s Leadership Forum & Reception in Sacramento.

“These scholarships invest directly in the next generation of women leaders for the state of California,” said Women’s Leadership Council Chair Raji K. Brar, COO of Countryside Corporation, in announcing that the sponsors and supporters of the forum and reception

have raised money for the scholarships.

The Minerva Scholarship was created by [Women in California Leadership](#), a nonprofit foundation launched in 2015 to empower women and enhance the lives of women and girls. As noted on its website, the foundation is committed to providing scholarships to select women of promise to help them achieve their educational objectives.

The program presents up to 126 one-time \$3,000 scholarships, plus one \$10,000 scholarship to full-time undergraduate and graduate students at accredited colleges. Selection of recipients is based on the applicants’ intellectual energy, scholastic achievement, community involvement and work history.

Past recipients have come from communities throughout the state and

have used the scholarships to help fund attendance at community colleges, the California State University, University of California, in-state and out-of-state colleges, and law school.

A sampling of the colleges and universities attended by scholarship recipients includes Brown, Yale, Spelman, Stanford, Cornell, Columbia, University of Southern California, Oklahoma State, Carnegie Mellon, Colorado State, UC Berkeley, UCLA Law, CSU Northridge, University of Massachusetts Global, Pennsylvania State University, Scripps College, and Howard University.

The [application process](#) for the 2026–2027 academic year begins April 13. Scholarship winners will be announced on July 15.

California Remains Top Exporting State

Computer and Electronic Products Make Up Most Exports and Imports



California, despite the current uncertainty around last year's tariffs, remained a

top exporting state in 2025, according to trade statistics released in February by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The [trade statistics](#) show that California exported \$188.4 billion worth of goods to the world in 2025 — up from \$183.93 billion in 2024. Overall, imports from the world to California were down slightly in 2025 to \$488.22 billion worth of goods, from \$491.47 billion in 2024.

The result is that total California goods trade is up to \$676.62 billion in 2025, a 0.1% increase from \$675.40 in 2024 — and the California goods deficit declined by \$7.72 billion.

As usual, computer and electronic products made up the bulk of California exports.

U.S. Trade Overview

The total U.S. trade deficit in goods and services fell slightly in 2025 by \$2.1 billion (0.2%) to a total of \$901.5 billion, compared to \$903.5 billion in 2024.

While the overall deficit barely moved, the goods deficit increased by 2.1% to \$1.24 trillion as the United States exported a total of \$2.18 trillion in goods around the world and imported \$3.42 trillion. Total goods trade equaled \$5.6 trillion — which was an overall yearly increase of nearly 5%.

The services surplus grew by 8.9% to \$339.5 billion.

The top U.S. trading partners in 2025 were Mexico, Canada, China, Taiwan, and Germany.

Trade between Canada and the United States fell 6.44% and trade between China and the U.S. showed a sharp decrease of almost 29%, mostly due to the ongoing trade wars.

In 2025, the United States had trade deficits with 97 countries and surpluses with 136.

California Export Markets

California's top five goods export markets, in order were: Mexico, Canada, Taiwan, Japan, and China.

South Korea followed in sixth place, with the Netherlands in seventh, Germany in eighth, the United Kingdom in ninth, and Singapore in 10th place (beating Malaysia and Hong Kong).

- Goods exports from California to Mexico increased from \$33.47 billion in 2024 to \$34.91 billion in 2025, maintaining the country's spot as California's top export partner.

- Canada remained California's second largest export destination with \$16.96 billion worth of goods; however, exports to Canada decreased from \$19.49 billion in 2024.

- Taiwan became California's third largest export partner as exports grew significantly, from \$9.56 billion in 2024 to \$14.3 billion in 2025.

- Exports from California to Japan totaled \$11.01 billion in 2025, an increase from \$10.87 billion in 2024.

- California exports to China totaled \$10.27 billion in 2025, a decrease from \$15.03 billion in 2024.

- South Korea exports totaled \$9.29 billion of California goods, up from \$8.75 billion in 2024.

- Exports from California to the Neth-

erlands totaled \$8.39 billion in 2025, up from \$7.31 billion in 2024.

- Exports from California to Germany totaled \$5.95 billion in 2025, a decrease from the 2024 figure of \$6.18 billion.

- The United Kingdom became California's ninth largest export partner in 2025, with \$5.61 billion worth of exports, a rise from its 2024 total of \$4.94 billion.

- Singapore became California's 10th ranked export market with a 2025 total of \$5.26 billion, a small increase from \$5.15 billion in 2024. This shift is due largely a drop in exports to Malaysia and Hong Kong.

California Imports

In 2025, California imported \$488.22 billion in goods. China was the source of \$75.94 billion of these goods — down from \$122.79 billion the previous year.

- Imports from Taiwan were up to \$63.47 billion in 2025 from \$40.47 billion in 2024.

- Mexico imports decreased to \$61.56 billion in 2025 from \$64.27 billion in 2024.

- Vietnamese imports to California

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Leading California Exports (in \$U.S. Millions)

Partner	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
World	\$174,810	\$186,312	\$179,033	\$188,934	\$188,404
Mexico	\$27,209	\$30,702	\$33,283	\$33,472	\$34,907
Canada	\$18,054	\$20,580	\$19,411	\$19,494	\$16,958
Taiwan	\$8,956	\$10,425	\$8,841	\$9,557	\$14,301
Japan	\$11,783	\$11,636	\$10,601	\$10,872	\$11,014
China	\$16,638	\$18,325	\$16,900	\$15,025	\$10,272
South Korea	\$11,579	\$11,553	\$9,378	\$8,746	\$9,294
Netherlands	\$6,125	\$6,512	\$6,112	\$7,310	\$8,393
Germany	\$7,595	\$6,258	\$5,912	\$6,182	\$5,953
United Kingdom	\$4,342	\$4,695	\$5,679	\$4,935	\$5,605
Singapore	\$4,909	\$5,134	\$4,403	\$5,154	\$5,255

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce

Women's Leadership Forum Celebrates Connections that Foster Success

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“Women — we do more than just raise families. Well-resourced women raise nations.”

Council member Fiona Hutton, founder and CEO of Fiona Hutton & Associates, said that this year marks her company's 25th anniversary. Knowing that only 15% of businesses survive for 25 years, she said, makes her feel “a little jazzy” as she looks back through “all the trials and tribulations and hardships and the exhilaration” of those years.

Diversity

Cassandra Pye, president of Lucas Public Affairs, moderated a half-hour discussion with panelists whose backgrounds exemplified the diversity of women leaders:

- **Raji K. Brar**, COO of Countryside Corporation in Bakersfield, and CalChamber Women's Leadership Council chair. Her first foray into business was 28 years ago with a Subway sandwich shop in Arvin. The family-owned and -operated company has grown to add other franchises (Taco Bell, Pizza Hut), plus farming, shopping centers, and construction in Kern and Tulare counties.

- **Jillian Pinney**, founder and president, **Chix Cabinets Direct, Inc.**, Roseville. Pinney started out in construction 22 years ago. She founded Chix Construction in Virginia Beach, Virginia before moving to California eight years ago to start Chix Cabinets.

- **Assembly Majority Leader Cecilia Aguiar-Curry (D-Winters)**, chair, **California Legislative Women's Caucus**.



Women's Leadership Council member Fiona Hutton, founder and CEO of Fiona Hutton & Associates, describes the hard work and support from women colleagues that have helped her firm grow and thrive for 25 years in the “rough and tumble world of politics and public affairs.”

Raised on a small farm — before the Future Farmers of America (FFA) began allowing women to join — Aguiar-Curry ran for student council and played basketball, among other pursuits. She was mayor of Winters before being elected to the Assembly in 2016.

Recurring themes in the panel discussion were the importance of working with people, mentors (women and men), community connections, internships, and networking in growing and developing the pool of women leaders.

Women's Leadership Council

The California Chamber of Commerce established the Women's Leadership

Council (WLC), a subcommittee of the CalChamber Board of Directors, to elevate the voice of women in business. Chaired by Raji K. Brar, COO of Countryside Corporation, with Ariel Roblin, president and general manager of KCRA-TV, serving as vice chair, the WLC brings together accomplished leaders from across industries to strengthen the presence and impact of California's women business leaders.

The council fosters connections with key decision makers in state government and highlights the vital contributions of women to the state's economy. For more information and a full list of council members, visit calchamber.com/wlc.

Photo by Lisa Nottingham



Cassandra Pye of Lucas Public Affairs moderates a lively discussion with Raji K. Brar of Countryside Corporation, Assembly Majority Leader Cecilia Aguiar-Curry (D-Winters), and Jillian Pinney of Chix Cabinets Direct, Inc. Their anecdotes about their paths to leadership in business and government roles inspired both laughter and applause from the audience.

California Remains Top Exporting State

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increased to \$56732 billion from \$38.46 billion the previous year.

- South Korea also sent fewer goods to California in 2025 — \$29.48 billion, down from \$30.87 billion the previous year.

- Japan sent more goods to California in 2025 — \$28.92 billion, up from \$27.65 billion in 2024.

- Imports from Thailand to California increased to \$20.56 billion from \$15.14 billion the previous year.

- Imports from Canada to California were down, totaling \$15.43 billion in 2024 compared to \$16.26 billion in 2024.

- German goods sent to California in 2025 decreased to \$12.8 billion from \$14.37 billion in 2024.

- Imports from Malaysia to California also were down slightly, with 2025 imports totaling \$12.3 billion versus \$12.36 billion in 2024.

Export Commodities

Exports in California's top category, computer and electronic products, increased from \$47.81 billion in 2024 to \$54.28 billion in 2025.

Nonelectrical machinery exports decreased from \$18.42 billion in 2024 to \$17.33 billion in 2025. Exports of chemicals (\$17.20 billion) and transportation equipment (\$17.09 billion) increased in 2025.

Agricultural products increased as well, from \$14.95 billion in 2024 to \$15.94 billion in 2025.

Import Commodities

The top import category for California in 2025 was computer and electronic products at \$176.22 billion. Other top imports to the Golden State included transportation equipment, electrical equipment, nonelectrical machinery, and miscellaneous manufactures.

CalChamber Position

California is one of the 10 largest economies in the world. Since moving up in 2024, California has ranked as the fourth largest economy in the world. Numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis show the state's gross domestic product (GDP) is nearly \$4.3 trillion.

International trade and investment are major parts of our economic engine that broadly benefit businesses, communities, consumers and state government.

California's economy is diverse, and the state's prosperity is tied to exports and imports of both goods and services by California-based companies, to exports and imports through California's transportation gateways, and to movement of human and capital resources.

Although trade is a nationally determined policy issue, its impact on California is immense. California exports to more than 225 foreign markets. Trade offers the opportunity to expand the role of California's exports. In its broadest terms, trade can literally feed the world and raise the living standards of those around us.

The California Chamber of Commerce supports expansion of international trade and investment, fair and equitable market access for California products abroad, and elimination of disincentives that impede the international competitiveness of California business.

Staff Contact: Susanne T. Stirling

Barrera Joins State Water Plan Committee

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is equivalent to 325,851 gallons.) State officials will examine supply, conservation, recharge, and storage strategies to achieve the plan's goals.

The advisory committee on which

Barrera is serving includes representatives of both agricultural and urban water suppliers, business, tribal, labor, environmental, and local government, among others.

State officials will focus on data,

supply targets, and key actions in their work on the California Water Plan 2028. A new project website, CaliforniaWaterPlan.com, will ensure transparency and public access throughout the process.

SICK LEAVE ≠ PTO ≠ VACATION

California rules explained.

Join the LIVE Webinar: March 19

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