

## **Statement by Commissioner Peter S. Silva**

*June 25, 2020*

Thanks for allowing me time to make opening remarks for today's meeting.

First, I want to thank Vice President Murray and [California Department of Fish and Wildlife] Director Bonham for their inspiring and heartfelt words yesterday regarding the difficult times we are experiencing, both with respect to social justice issues as well as the deadly pandemic, COVID-19. I will build on their comments.

In thinking about what to say today, I decided it might be best to share my experience and perspective as a person of color in this society.

As background, I am a first-generation American of Mexican descent and also am proud of my rich Native American heritage. I was born and raised in the small town of Brawley, California, one of 13 children. Growing up, my father was a farm worker who worked hard to keep food on the table and provide for his family.

Looking back on my younger years, very early on I was made to feel somehow different, not totally American. Even through high school, there were many subtle and not-so subtle actions that at times made me ashamed of my Mexican heritage.

Despite some obstacles, I was able to obtain a college degree and make a career in civil engineering. While going through college and through most of my career, it has been disappointing to see the lack of diversity in my chosen field.

Even in California, there were times where clearly the color of my skin was a factor in decisions that negatively affected my career.

Fast forward to today.

I am older and wiser and can tell you from personal experience that white privilege does indeed exist.

I fully understand how most, if not all, people of color in this country are made to feel less than whole as an American. It is disheartening to know that the president of the United States feels that Mexicans coming to this country are largely murderers and rapists. Yes, racism is still alive and well.

But I do have hope. The numerous protests that we have seen in this country are bringing attention to the long-standing issue of social injustice that has long plagued our country.

Part of my hope is that I am finally hearing from the white community that indeed there is white privilege. I applaud both Vice President Murray and Director Bonham for making that statement in their remarks yesterday. We cannot have a dialogue about race without first agreeing on what the core issues are, and where we are starting from.

So, what does this mean for us as a commission and the department?

I have a few thoughts:

I agree totally with Vice President Murray that we have to work harder to ensure that our work at the commission can better engage people of color and disadvantaged communities in all of our programs. I also challenge the department to make this a priority.

Director Bonham raised the point about training for his staff on diversity issues and I support his effort. However, I think it goes beyond that to hiring and ensuring that our commission and department staffs reflect the diversity that we have currently in California.

We have some work to do as a commission and as a society to get to a better place for social justice. Again, I am hopeful and look forward to working together to do our part.

Thank you.