



# California Environmental Compliance Without Bottlenecks:

## How Legal Intelligence Empowers Businesses



**Darin Neufeld**  
Director, Environmental Planning + Compliance

*Democratizing access to the right legal tools helped this multidisciplinary team of California environmental consulting professionals make informed decisions faster.*

### Operating in the U.S. epicenter of environmental consulting

Consulting on environmental law compliance in a highly litigious, heavily regulated state with the nation's largest legal system is a perpetual chess match — where the rules can change mid-game and overlooking one court opinion could derail years of project planning.

"California is a global leader on climate action and environmental policy, with groundbreaking initiatives and unique regulatory complexities that often exceed federal guidelines," said [Darin Neufeld](#) of [Harris & Associates](#), a planning, funding, environmental compliance, civil engineering and construction management firm. "It's why we love operating here, but it also presents a moving target that requires constant vigilance and keeping up with case law and legislation."

As director of environmental planning and sustainability, Neufeld guides public agencies and private companies through the permitting process for their projects, mitigating risks and ensuring compliance. His role often involves helping clients in the municipal, water, transport and education markets comply with

state-specific regulations — particularly the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) — and create plans with sustainability strategies at the forefront.

The firm's offices and project sites span the West Coast, powered by more than 280 employee-owners. While the majority of Harris & Associates' staff are not attorneys, their work requires deep technical understanding of California law and an ongoing grasp of how local and federal courts are interpreting environmental regulations. They must also regularly coordinate with county counsels, city attorneys and real estate lawyers on various projects, document reviews, considerations around biological and cultural resources, noise, air quality, greenhouse gases and other legal issues that arise during the entitlement process.

If environmental compliance professionals misinterpret case law or miss critical regulatory updates, the consequences can be devastating — from project shutdowns and costly litigation to years of delays and irreparable damage to client relationships.



*"We're not just solving technical problems, we're protecting our clients' visions while safeguarding California's natural resources," Neufeld said. "When millions of dollars in development and critical infrastructure projects hang in the balance, having reliable legal insights isn't just nice to have; it's nonnegotiable."*

## The approach: “We always had to ask attorneys for cases”

For environmental experts without law degrees, staying current with California's ever-evolving case law often means leaning on legal counsel for client-specific interpretations and takeaways. But that reliance can create bottlenecks, limiting practitioners' ability to make quick, informed decisions.

“We prioritize efficiency and autonomy, which means empowering our team with the right tools,” Neufeld said. “In the past, we always had to ask attorneys for cases that might impact our environmental planning decisions or change how we interpret compliance requirements. Gaining access to CEB’s resources allowed us to conduct the research on our own.”

It was almost a decade ago when Neufeld first used CEB’s [“Practice Under the California Environmental Quality Act,”](#) which provides detailed guidance on helping municipalities, companies and developers navigate the environmental impacts of proposed projects and consider alternatives to mitigate potential harm.

Now, when Neufeld and his team are faced with a regulatory or compliance head-scratcher, they can turn to case law analysis, compliance checklists, document templates, expert commentary and advice compiled by practicing attorneys and judges across California.

One section under the CEQA guidelines (15183) outlines the requirements for projects that are consistent with zoning, community plan, or general plan for which an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) has been certified, which plays a key role in ensuring legal defensibility.

This seemingly technical aspect of environmental compliance became critically important when California’s legal landscape shifted in 2024.



*“Just in the last two years, there were two pivotal cases that changed how we utilized this process under CEQA – [Gregory Lucas v. City of Pomona and Hilltop Group Inc. v. County of San Diego,](#)” Neufeld said. “With [Practice Under the California Environmental Quality Act,](#) I was able to quickly find those cases and understand their implications.”*

[CEB’s integrated platform](#) proved particularly valuable as it summarizes rulings and links directly to full case texts.

“While reviewing a section, I can open the cases in another window, examine the specifics and see how the new standards affect our analysis,” Neufeld said. “That gives me clear guidance for how we, as practitioners, should adapt – and I’ve relied on it multiple times in the past six months.”

Neufeld has also integrated CEB’s [DailyNews](#) coverage into his workflow.

“It’s my landing page when I open the platform, and I’ve discovered articles I wouldn’t have otherwise known about – like recent pieces on [hydrogen fueling infrastructure](#) and other [climate change developments.](#)”



## A tool for multidisciplinary teams

The practical applications extend across Harris & Associates' various technical disciplines, creating a more integrated approach to environmental compliance.

"Having these resources available doesn't just help me," Neufeld said. "Our biologists access the natural resources packages when working with endangered species regulations, while our archaeologists consult relevant codes and resources for historical preservation compliance. Each specialist can directly engage with the legal frameworks that govern their specific technical area."

By democratizing access to legal knowledge across various disciplines, Harris & Associates has become a more nimble organization where technical experts can confidently navigate California's complex environmental regulations without constant legal consultation.

"Most of us practitioners are good about attending workshops and lectures on new case law and legislation every year," Neufeld said. "We attend the Association of Environmental Professionals Advanced CEQA workshops and conferences where case law from the previous year is presented, but with CEB, you can go deeper on your own. You can read analysis of the cases and the cases themselves, so it's part of a wider strategy."

In an industry where regulatory compliance can make or break a project's success, having the right legal resources isn't just about checking boxes — it's about building the knowledge necessary to navigate California environmental law with confidence and precision.

"One of my favorite aspects of what I do is coordinating with city attorneys and county counsels and applying lessons from case law as we practice," Neufeld said. "I've always enjoyed that and been involved both on the county side in cases that set precedents and then the private side, reviewing cases and using them to inform our work."



His advice to other environmental professionals on incorporating CEB into their workflow is straightforward:



*"Utilize it, read it and rely on it because it makes you a more well-rounded practitioner, more knowledgeable."*

Curious how CEB can streamline your organization's approach to environmental compliance?

▶ [Schedule a demo/trial ID to see how CEB can help.](#)

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