

California Looking to Rebound in 2010

Contributed by James Thompson

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The numerous avenues of content distribution available today offer filmmakers more opportunities than ever to display their work --–– and this has led to a substantial increase in production nationwide. But, at the same time, production has been decreasing in California. Most insiders attribute this to fierce competition as other states lure production away from California. Others blame complacent California legislators operating under the misconception that they had a captive industry, and thus did little to keep production in the state.

To gain insight into this problem and learn more about opportunities available to California filmmakers, P3 Update interviewed three sources: the president of a permitting authority in a major metropolitan city, a film commissioner located in a pristine mountain region, and the president of a service provider that conducts business in and on the Pacific Ocean off the California coast.

FilmL.A., Inc. President Paul Audley

FilmL.A., Inc. coordinates and processes on location production permits for several cities in the Los Angeles area, including the City and County of Los Angeles. FilmL.A., Inc. President Paul Audley believes the process of bringing production back to California is going to be challenging, because many other states have built up infrastructure and lured crews from California to their regions. “I think it was a shock to California, so they finally came in this year with a limited incentive, which we’re hoping will make a difference," he says.

While Audley believes that creating this incentive is a step in the right direction, he also believes that many states offering incentives are reevaluating these offers. According to Audley, this incentive war has created a lot of competition, and many states are finding they are being drained with no return. “So you're going to see some fall-off in competition,” Audley explains. “The other part of it is California has an infrastructure that is unmatched.” He adds that filmmakers who go to other states often complain that the process takes much longer because nobody knows how to deal with the film industry. Audley also claims that, in Los Angeles, the process of making a film is quicker and easier. “There are companies ready to spring into action and are used to dealing with film companies that work exclusively in the entertainment industry. The city is now taking great leaps toward saying we recognize the value of the industry. We recognize its importance to our economy, and we are going to do things to improve filming in Los Angeles.”

Audley explains that the L.A. City Council is focusing on the issue and considering the possibility of having separate tax incentives for Los Angeles, as well as improving conditions for filming on the city’s streets. “The mayor’s office has taken a direct interest to making things run more quickly through city departments, ”he says. Audley recommends contacting FilmL.A., Inc. for any concerns about filming in the City or County of Los Angeles. “We’ll pretty-much bend over backwards to make things work for you.”

Madera County, Calif. Film Commissioner Dave Wolin

Central California’s Madera County occupies more than 1,374,000 acres in the heart of the Central Valley and Central Sierras, including the high Sierra Mountains and Yosemite National Park. But Madera County Film Commissioner Dave Wolin tells it like it is: “Business is terrible in California.”

Wolin blames the production downturn on the poor state of the economy and the incentives other states are offering, but he predicts that things will eventually turn around. "The states offering big incentives are finding that they are not making money on giving away the profits, and long-term, we'll see major film production return to California," says Wolin. "2010 is probably not the turnaround year. The fact is the state incentives will work, but there are already projects in place elsewhere, and it will take some time to bring them back."

Wolin believes that Madera County has a lot to offer the film community, and he points out that Bass Lake and the Sierra Vista National Scenic Byway located above the Lake offer magnificent forest scenery. According to Wolin, the Pines Resort on Bass Lake is an ideal place to film — it offers superb and reasonably-priced accommodations for companies filming in the area, especially in the off-season. He also notes that until the recent economic downturn, car commercials had been taking advantage of the area's long winding roads. "The car-commercial business dried up just a year ago," he says.

Wolin's advice to anyone filming in the state is to contact a local Film Liaisons in California Statewide (FLICS) representative for help. "They should contact one of FLICS's film commissions, who will not only help them with locations in their specific area, but also recommend other areas where there are other professional people who can help them."

Cinema Aquatics President Jim Pearson

It's not often you get to call the Pacific Ocean off the coast of California your office. Jim Pearson from Cinema Aquatics can do just that because it's where he spends most of his time working. His job has him on the water shooting from boats and sometimes in the water collecting underwater footage.

While the current economy hasn't drastically impacted his business, Pearson does feel the pinch. "My hope is that it does improve," he notes. "The producers are really keeping their eye on the marketplace. I think California might have smartened up and realized they're losing business and starting to drive people out of the state." But Pearson says bouncing back might prove challenging because producers might decide not to return after they're seduced by the creative atmosphere and support offered by other locales. "It becomes their default position," Pearson adds.

Pearson sees California's talented crew base as the main advantage of filming in the state, and he feels the California coast is a unique setting that offers unparalleled beauty. "A lot of commercials like to film here because of our wonderful scenic background," he says. Pearson's first choice for coastal locations is off of Catalina Island because the coves offer protection from the winds, and the water is crystal clear for underwater photography. "California is great for filming," he sums up.