

# Guest Commentary: A case for film incentives...

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By Ridgecrest Film Commissioner Ray Arthur

When it was first announced that Warner Bros. Pictures planned to shoot its long-awaited "Superman Returns" in Australia, it raised a few eyebrows. In fact, when McG, who was attached to helm the Superman movie a few years ago, fell out, he said it was partly because of his wanting to shoot the American symbol of hope in New York, the template for Superman's home city of Metropolis.



Ray Arthur

But "Truth, Justice and the Australian Way" won the studio over, and that is where Bryan Singer directed preproduction and principal photography from October 2004-November 2005.

"It's all economics," producer Gil Adler says. "It's the rebate. A lot of money was saved."

The Australian government offers a 12.5 percent rebate, and the states offer various labor-based payroll incentives on top of that. The then-stronger U.S. dollar also was a factor.

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Prior to the decision to move "Superman Returns" to Australia, there was a large photo of the Trona Pinnacles on the wall of the locations department at Warner Bros. studios in Burbank. Under the photo was a hand written note that simply read "BEAT THIS!" The Trona Pinnacles was the location for the planet Krypton.

The Ridgecrest Regional Film Commission has experienced first hand the effects of runaway production. Due in part to tax incentives, we were considered for, but lost, "Flight of the Phoenix," "Sahara," "Van Helsing," "Super Cross," and "The Island." And it is not just feature films. California loses millions of dollars in revenue from "runaway" TV programs, commercials and music videos every week.

In 2001 PLANET OF THE APES generated \$4.3 million dollars in local revenue to Ridgecrest. Since then, due in part to "runaway production," the annual average for film production revenue has dropped over 40 percent, from \$4.2 million to \$2.4 million. And similar losses are reflected throughout California. Commercial productions also leave millions more dollars throughout Kern County each year increasing the amount of taxes our city and county collects.

It is worth noting that while in Ridgecrest and other communities throughout California; productions do not utilize our schools or local infrastructure and have a minimal impact on our environment. The motion picture industry is a clean industry which creates jobs that pay competitive wages and offer generous benefits.

Other regions are aggressively luring production to their locales. Louisiana, New York, Illinois, New Mexico and 22 other states, as well as Canada, New Zealand and a dozen other countries have witnessed dramatic increases in motion picture production after implementing incentive programs.

Ridgecrest and Kern County's future success in retaining and attracting the positive economic benefits motion picture production brings to our region will depend upon our ability to effectively compete in today's new global market. These out of state opportunities continue to shrink Ridgecrest and California's market share of the world's motion picture production growth.

Ridgecrest and Kern County's leaders need to once again step forward and focus their lens on California's Legislature and the Governor for their leadership in passing legislative programs such as AB 777. This bill targets those film productions that have historically filmed in California and Ridgecrest, but now choose to film out of state because of these competitive incentives. Considering that motion picture production is one of California's signature industries it seems like it should have been green lit already, especially as California continues to be surpassed in the overall market share of motion picture production in the world. AB 777 is a step in the right direction for California.

Historically, filmmakers have flocked to California for its abundance of creative talent, weather and incredible landscape. Since the 1920's the motion picture industry has churned out thousands of movies that were filmed in California and showed off the aesthetic beauty of this state to the world. Movies like "Star Trek V," "Planet of the Apes," "Hidalgo," "Holes," "The Hulk," and "Jurassic Park" have captured the Ridgecrest region's uniqueness in such a way that only films can. When movie goers see Ridgecrest and Kern County on the big screen they are more likely to travel to our city and county, eat in our restaurants and stay in our hotel rooms.

As California's Legislative members take their summer recess and head out to watch this summer's blockbusters, they need to remember that they are looking at the final product of an industry that has generated billions of dollars in tax revenue for California, sustained generations of skilled workers and supported thousands of businesses throughout the entire state. I say to them that if they supply the film incentive that we will supply next year's movie. A movie that can once again capture the image and ideals of the people and places in Ridgecrest, Kern County and California and project them to the world as California's own.