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Governor appoints Merced County judge Proietti is a longtime Merced attorney in private practice.

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Donald J. Proietti, a private-practice civil attorney, was appointed as a Merced County judge Wednesday by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"He has selected me to do a very important job," 54-year-old Proietti said Thursday after the decision was made public. "I'm humbled and honored to serve the community where I grew up."

His appointment brings Merced County Superior Court's judicial bench up to eight. It's still down by one judge, and another two should be appointed mid-year, though the state's budget crisis may change that.

Proietti, a Democrat, said he hopes to join the bench mid-March, giving him time to close out some cases and transfer others at the law firm where he's worked since 1979, Allen, Proietti & Fagalde.

As a judge, he will make \$178,789 a year.

He earned a Juris Doctorate degree from the Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego and a bachelor's degree from the University of Arizona, Tucson.

Proietti began as an associate at the firm and became a partner in 1983.

At the suggestion of his wife, who believed he had the right temperament for the bench, he considered seeking a judgeship. "I reached a point in my career when I was looking for a new challenge," he said.

He applied in February 2008 for the position created by a 2006 bill that authorized 50 more judges across the state.

The vetting process, which included interviews, confidential critiques by colleagues and a lengthy application, took more than a year.

After legal experience, a judge's temperament is key, he said. It's important for residents, whether they win or lose, to walk out of the courtroom feeling that their side was heard and justly considered, he said. "For people walking in for the first time, it's a very intimidating experience," Proietti noted.

The appointment brings a bit of relief to the cadre of the judges, Presiding Judge John Kiriara said.

"We are overloaded and understaffed," Kiriara said. "Any help lessens the load."

On average, county judges across the state hear between 2,500 and 3,000 cases each year. In Merced, that case load is about 7,000, Kiriara said.

Court leaders will meet with Proietti to discuss what type of cases -- civil or criminal -- he will hear when he begins.

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judge