

Date of Hearing: April 28, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Isaac G. Bryan, Chair

AB 1311 (Hart) – As Amended March 28, 2025

SUBJECT: California Rangeland, Grazing Land, and Grassland Protection Program

SUMMARY: Appropriates, from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (Proposition 4), \$400 million for the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) to award grants to eligible entities to acquire conservation easements on qualified property that is privately owned and supports the production of food and fiber and ecosystem services, including, but not limited to, wildfire fuel reduction, groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat, and open vistas.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the California Rangeland, Grazing Land, and Grassland Protection Program to protect California's rangeland, grazing land, and grasslands through the use of conservation easements. (Public Resources Code (PRC) 10331)
- 2) Authorizes, under the program, funds to be expended by WCB for the acquisition of conservation easements over qualified property and authorizes WCB to make grants of funds to a state agency, local public agency, or nonprofit organization for the acquisition of conservation easements over qualified property. (PRC 10334)
- 3) Requires WCB to authorize the acquisition of real property, rights in real property, water, or water rights as may be necessary to carry out the purposes of this chapter. (Fish and Game Code 1348)
- 4) Authorizes, pursuant to Proposition 4, \$870 million, upon appropriation by the Legislature, to WCB for grant programs to protect and enhance fish and wildlife resources and habitat and achieve the state's biodiversity, public access, and conservation goals. (PRC 93010)

THIS BILL:

- 1) Defines "eligible entity" as an entity that meets all of the following criteria:
 - a) The entity has received accreditation from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission at the time of applying for a grant;
 - b) The entity demonstrates the capacity to acquire a conservation easement within 18 months of the award of a grant; and,
 - c) The entity demonstrates the financial capacity to comply with perpetual stewardship monitoring requirements associated with accreditation from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.
- 2) Appropriates \$400 million from Proposition 4 to WCB.

- 3) Requires WCB to award the funds as grants to eligible entities to acquire conservation easements on qualified property that is privately owned and supports the production of food and fiber and ecosystem services, including, but not limited to, wildfire fuel reduction, groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat, and open vistas.
- 4) Provides that a grant awarded to an eligible entity may comprise both of the following amounts:
 - a) Up to 100% of the appraised value of a conservation easement, as determined by a qualified appraisal that has been reviewed and approved by the Department of General Services.
 - b) Up to \$75,000 for expenses related to the processing of a conservation easement.
- 5) Requires, on or before June 30, 2027, WCB to disburse 75% of the funds to grantees through grant agreements.
- 6) Requires, on or before June 30, 2028, WCB to disburse the remaining 25% of the funds to grantees through grant agreements.
- 7) Requires WCB to allocate the funds as follows:
 - a) \$25 million to eligible entities in the northern region, consisting of the Counties of Lassen, Modoc, Plumas, Shasta, Siskiyou, Tehama, and Trinity.
 - b) \$40 million to eligible entities in the north coast region, consisting of the Counties of Del Norte, Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, and Sonoma.
 - c) \$10 million to eligible entities in the mountain region, consisting of the Counties of Alpine, El Dorado, Mono, Nevada, Placer, and Sierra.
 - d) \$20 million to eligible entities in the Sacramento Valley region, consisting of the Counties of Butte, Colusa, Glenn, Sacramento, Solano, Sutter, Yolo, and Yuba.
 - e) \$55 million to eligible entities in the San Joaquin Valley region, consisting of the Counties of Amador, Calaveras, Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Tuolumne.
 - f) \$75 million to eligible entities in the bay area region, consisting of the Counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San Francisco, and San Mateo.
 - g) \$95 million to eligible entities in the central coast region, consisting of the Counties of Monterey, San Benito, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo.
 - h) \$5 million to eligible entities in the desert region, consisting of the Counties of Inyo and San Bernardino.
 - i) \$75 million to eligible entities in the southern region, consisting of the Counties of Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Diego, and Ventura.

- 8) Authorizes, if WCB determines, on or before June 30, 2027, that it is unable to allocate funds in that schedule due to a lack of demand, WCB to, in its discretion, reallocate those funds to another region where there is a higher demand.
- 9) Requires, on or before June 30, 2029, a grantee to expend the grant funds to acquire a conservation easement and record the conservation easement.
- 10) Authorizes WCB to partner with, and receive funds from, land trusts that are certified by the Natural Resources Conservation Service of the United States Department of Agriculture under the federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, as part of the Agricultural Land Easement component of the program, for purposes of implementing this bill.

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS:

1) **Author's statement:**

AB 1311 will help California reach our 30x30 goals by funding voluntary conservation easements through the Wildlife Conservation Board's Rangeland, Grazing Land and Grassland Protection Program. The bill will provide financial incentives to landowners to protect rangelands, while simultaneously helping the state meet our conservation goals through a cost-effective approach. AB 1311 will help advance conservation on California's working lands, support wildfire fuel reduction, groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat, and the preservation of open space.

- 2) **Proposition 4.** The Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024, approved by the voters as Proposition 4 at the November 5, 2024, statewide general election, authorized \$10 billion in general obligation bonds to finance projects for safe drinking water, drought, flood, and water resilience, wildfire and forest resilience, coastal resilience, extreme heat mitigation, biodiversity and nature-based climate solutions, climate-smart, sustainable, and resilient farms, ranches, and working lands, park creation and outdoor access, and clean air programs.

Of these funds, the bond act makes \$870 million available to WCB for grant programs to protect and enhance fish and wildlife resources and habitat and achieve the state's biodiversity, public access, and conservation goals.

- 3) **Rangelands.** California is home to 38 million acres of rangeland that provides open space, watersheds, carbon storage, food, fiber and habitat for diverse plants and wildlife. On average, approximately 50,000 acres of farmland and rangeland are lost per year, of that 21,000 acres per year are lost to urbanization. According to a 2016 American Farmland Trust report on the status of farmland across the nation, California is on track to lose 500,000 acres of rangeland and pastureland by 2040. Over the last two centuries, 75% of the state's native vegetation and more than 90% of wetlands have been altered, reducing biodiversity and ecological resilience. Conversion of rangeland to urban uses may increase GHG emissions up to 100-fold. The state's 2019 Draft *California 2030 Natural and Working Lands Climate Change Implementation Plan* notes that, to achieve conservation and carbon sequestration

goals on rangelands, the 2030 goal includes increasing fivefold the acres of cultivated lands and rangelands under state-funded soil conservation practices.

According to the author, investing in rangeland conservation protects important ecosystem services or environmental benefits that all Californians depend upon. For example, conserving rangelands protects watersheds, as more than two-thirds of surface waters used for municipal and crop production in California are derived from rangeland watersheds.

- 4) **This bill.** AB 1311 prescribes how \$400 million of the \$870 million authorized by Proposition 4 will be distributed regionally, and specifies that the purpose is to acquire conservation easements on qualified property that is privately owned and supports the production of food and fiber and ecosystem services, including, but not limited to, wildfire fuel reduction, groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat, and open vistas

The author may wish to work with the Budget Committee as it considers all of the Proposition 4 funds for inclusion in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Budget Act.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Cattlemen's Association
California Farm Bureau
California Rangeland Trust

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Paige Brokaw / NAT. RES. /