

Date of Hearing: April 13, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Isaac G. Bryan, Chair

AB 1548 (Pellerin) – As Amended April 6, 2026

SUBJECT: Conservation: the Monterey Bay Area Stewardship Authority

SUMMARY: Establishes the Monterey Bay Area Stewardship Authority (Authority), a regional entity with jurisdiction extending throughout the Monterey Bay region, as defined.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the Natural Resources Agency, which oversees six state departments, 11 conservancies, 17 boards and commissions, three councils, and one urban park in Los Angeles that consists of two museums. (Government Code (GC) 12805)
- 2) Establishes the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority as a regional entity to generate and allocate resources for the protection and enhancement of tidal wetlands and other wildlife habitat in and surrounding the San Francisco Bay. (GC 66700 – 66706)
- 3) Establishes the Salton Sea Authority as the joint powers authority comprised of the County of Imperial, the County of Riverside, the Imperial Irrigation District, the Coachella Valley Water District, and the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indian Tribe. (Fish and Game Code 2941 (d))
- 4) Establishes the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency to maintain an equilibrium between the regions' natural endowment and its manmade environment, to preserve the scenic beauty and recreational opportunities of the region, and for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency and governmental effectiveness of the region, and grants the authority to adopt and enforce a regional plan of resource conservation and orderly development, to exercise effective environmental controls, and to perform other essential functions. (GC 67040)
- 5) Establishes the Sonoma County Regional Climate Protection Authority to perform coordination and implementation activities, within the boundaries of Sonoma County, to assist those agencies in meeting their greenhouse gas emission reduction goals as set forth in resolutions and adopted plans and develop, coordinate, and implement programs and policies to comply with the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 [AB 32 (Núñez), Chapter 488, Statutes of 2006], and other federal or state mandates and programs designed to respond to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. (Public Utilities Code 181000)

THIS BILL:

- 1) States that it is in the public interest to establish the Authority as a regional entity to raise and allocate public and private funds for purposes of restoring, enhancing, protecting, engaging in long term stewardship, and improving access for the public enjoyment of natural and working lands in the Monterey Bay region and along the region's shoreline.
- 2) Establishes the Authority as a regional entity with jurisdiction extending throughout the Monterey Bay region.

- 3) Exempts the jurisdiction of the Authority from the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000.
- 4) Establishes the purposes of the Authority are to raise and allocate public and private funds for purposes of restoring, enhancing, protecting, engaging in long term stewardship, and improving access for the enjoyment of natural and working lands in the Monterey Bay region and along the region's shoreline.
- 5) States the intent of the Legislature that the Authority complements existing and future efforts of communities, local governments, and state and federal entities.
- 6) Requires the Authority to be governed by a board that consists of nine specified voting members, as specified. Establishes processes for appointing public members and establishes board member term limits. Establishes procedures for the board to select a chair and vice chair.
- 7) Requires members of the board to be subject to the Political Reform Act of 1974.
- 8) Requires the board's first meeting to occur at a time and place in the Monterey Bay region after all nine initial board members are appointed. After its first meeting, requires the board to hold meetings at times and places determined by the board.
- 9) Requires meetings of the board to be subject to the Ralph M. Brown Act.
- 10) Requires, within 6 months of the board's first meeting, the board to convene a Monterey Bay Area Stewardship Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee) of no more than 12 members to assist and advise the board in carrying out its functions. Establishes the membership makeup of the Advisory Committee. Requires procedures for adopting per diem expenses.
- 11) Provides that the board is the legislative body of the authority and requires it to establish policies for the operation of the Authority. Requires the board to ensure that the Authority's policies, funding programs, and decision-making processes advance fair treatment and meaningful involvement of rural, agricultural, tribal, underserved, and disadvantaged communities, consistent with the meaning of environmental justice.
- 12) Authorizes the Authority to exercise, all powers, expressed or implied, that are necessary to carry out the intent and purposes of the bill, as specified.
- 13) Prohibits the Authority from acquiring or owning real property.
- 14) Establishes rules for calling for a special election for a ballot measure to generate revenues for the Authority.
- 15) Establishes the Authority as a district, as defined in Section 317 of the Elections Code.
- 16) Provides that the appropriations limit for the Authority shall be originally established based on receipts from the initial measure that would generate revenues for the Authority.
- 17) Establishes ballot measure procedures for the Authority and the impacted counties to follow for a special election, including transmission of results and reimbursement for election costs.

- 18) Authorizes the Authority to award grants to local governments, tribal entities, nonprofit organizations, and private entities, including, but not limited to, owners of agricultural land, for eligible projects on public and private lands within the Monterey Bay region.
- 19) Requires an eligible project to do one or more of the following:
- a) Restore, protect, enhance, or maintain natural, working, or open space lands, including, but not limited to, rangelands, farms, wetlands, riparian corridors, forests, coastal habitats, and watersheds, to improve ecological function, soil health, water quality, and regional climate resilience.
 - b) Implement nature-based or working-lands practices that contribute to greenhouse gas reduction, biodiversity protection, or water and soil resilience, including, but not limited to, riparian, stream, and floodplain restoration, soil health, carbon sequestration, and groundwater recharge, beneficial fire, vegetation, or grazing management that supports wildfire risk reduction and ecosystem health, and habitat connectivity.
 - c) Support voluntary and collaborative conservation and land management partnerships among tribes, agricultural landowners, conservation organizations, local governments, the state, and the federal government, including, but not limited to, efforts that support sustain long-term coordination, shared planning, and stewardship, strengthen cultural and ecological stewardship, sustain working lands, and advance the region's ecological and economic resilience.
 - d) Support long term stewardship, facilitated access, monitoring, and maintenance necessary to sustain ecological, agricultural, or community benefits, including community education, outreach, or training that strengthens long term stewardship outcomes.
- 20) Requires the Authority, when awarding grants, to give priority to projects that, to the greatest extent possible, do all of the following:
- a) Demonstrate measurable benefits to climate resilience, biodiversity, water resilience, agricultural viability, equitable outdoor access, and ancestral land return and access, including projects that expand community participation or reduce barriers to engagement in planning and stewardship.
 - b) Demonstrate that rural, agricultural, tribal, underserved, or disadvantaged communities were meaningfully engaged in project design, development, and implementation, and that the project delivers measurable benefits to those communities.
 - c) Support the growth of the region's stewardship workforce, including training, apprenticeships, internships, tribal youth stewardship programs, agricultural and land management career pathways, and other efforts that build local capacity for long term land and water stewardship, restoration, and climate resilience.
- 21) Requires the Authority to consult with the Advisory Committee when developing grant evaluation procedures and funding recommendations.
- 22) Authorizes grants to be used to support all phases of eligible projects, including project design, planning, permitting, construction, implementation, operations, monitoring,

maintenance, reporting, administrative requirements, and stewardship, except to the extent that the source of funding for the grant prohibits use of its funding for such use.

- 23) Prohibits the board from awarding a grant for a project on private lands unless it first determines that the project will provide a long-term public benefit consistent with the purposes of this bill.
- 24) Requires the board to provide for regular audits of the Authority's accounts and records, maintain accounting records, and report accounting transactions in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles.
- 25) Requires the board to provide for annual financial reports and make them available to the public.
- 26) Requires the Authority to be funded through the sources specified any other lawful source.
- 27) Finds and declares that this is a special statute is necessary and that a general statute cannot be made applicable within the meaning of Section 16 of Article IV of the California Constitution because of the unique need to establish the Monterey Bay Area Stewardship Authority for purposes of restoring, enhancing, protecting, engaging in long term stewardship, and improving access to natural and working lands in the Counties of Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz.
- 28) Requires, if the Commission on State Mandates determines that this bill contains costs mandated by the state, reimbursement to local agencies and school districts for those costs to be made.

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS:

1) Author's statement:

There is a unique interconnectedness between Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito Counties. We share lands, waterways, mountains and valleys. This region represents one of California's most ecologically and culturally significant landscapes. Increasing climate pressures including wildfire risk, coastal erosion, drought, flooding, and watershed degradation are impacting the viability of many of our iconic beaches, wildlife, redwood forests, coastlines, open spaces and rivers. The health of the region's landscapes, farms, forests, wetlands, and coastlines are closely tied to the region's economic and community well-being.

Despite these shared challenges, local governments and community organizations often lack the resources and capacity to compete for and manage the growing number of state and federal climate resilience funding opportunities.

AB 1548 establishes the Monterey Bay Area Stewardship Authority to help the region work together to attract new resources, strengthen coordination, and support long-term stewardship of the lands and waters that sustain local communities and the Central Coast economy.

- 2) **Monterey Bay region.** The Monterey Bay region covers an area of 3.1 million acres and represents one of California's most ecologically and culturally significant landscapes. The Monterey Bay region is home to biodiversity and vital habitats that support native species such as California condors, steelhead, salmon, endemic plants, and critical wildlife corridors and nesting sites.

The Monterey Bay region is shaped by rivers, floodplains, and some of the state's largest wetland systems, including the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve and the Watsonville Slough Ecological Reserve. The region's major rivers include the San Lorenzo River, which drains from the Santa Cruz Mountains; the Pajaro River, which directly links the region; and the Salinas and Carmel Rivers. These waterways, along with the surrounding mountains, valleys, and wetlands of the Santa Cruz Mountains, the Gabilan Range, the Diablo Range, and the Santa Lucia Range, support one of the world's most diverse and productive agricultural economies, where farmers and ranchers manage millions of acres and play a key role in land stewardship and connectivity that benefits both the region's economy and ecological health. The preservation of agricultural lands in active production is vital to the region's resilience and long-term prosperity.

- 3) **Existing authorities.** The state has 11 dedicated regional conservancies across the state, but none have jurisdiction covering the Monterey Bay region.

The Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG) was organized in 1968 for the purpose of regional collaboration and problem solving. The AMBAG region includes Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz Counties. AMBAG serves as both a federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and a Council of Governments (COG). Among its many duties, AMBAG manages the region's transportation demand model and prepares regional housing, population and employment forecast that are utilized in a variety of regional plans.

In 2016, AMBAG coordinated a Sustainable Communities Strategy Implementation Toolkits with examples of projects and best practices to help achieve regional and local sustainability goals and emission reduction targets through efforts to provide housing, jobs, and services in proximity to one another and to better link them by transit and safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access. The goals of the Authority in this bill align with the efforts of AMBAG, but have a far wider scope for the region.

Over the past several decades, according to the author, the region has made meaningful progress protecting land and restoring key landscapes through the work of land trusts, resource conservation districts, local governments, special districts, and state and federal agencies. These partners have the tools and capacity to acquire land and implement conservation projects.

What the region has consistently identified as a challenge is the long-term stewardship of those lands once projects are completed. Climate impacts such as drought, wildfire, flooding, and habitat loss are increasing the complexity and cost of managing landscapes over time. Ongoing management, restoration, monitoring, and workforce capacity require stable and flexible funding that is not consistently available through existing state or federal funding cycles.

- 4) **Monterey Bay Regional Authority.** The 2024 *Monterey Bay Natural and Working Lands Climate Mitigation and Resilience Study*, conducted by AMBAG, identified land stewardship and management strategies across the region that could significantly reduce emissions while strengthening climate resilience. The study also found that maintaining and managing the region's natural and working lands will require sustained regional investment and coordination across jurisdictions. Similarly, the state's Regional Investment Initiative under the Labor and Workforce Development Agency identified natural and working lands as a key sector of the economy and as essential sectors to invest in.

AB 1548 responds to this gap by establishing a regional mechanism to secure and coordinate long-term stewardship funding and to support coordinated investment at the scale the landscape requires

The bill's findings and declarations state that the region's natural and working lands are critical to community well-being and climate resilience. However, access to these public benefits is uneven. Rural, agricultural, and indigenous communities across the region have faced longstanding environmental injustices, including contaminated drinking water, pesticide exposure, air pollution, and underinvestment in infrastructure and green spaces. These communities also continue to experience disproportionate climate impacts, including water insecurity, extreme heat, and flooding, alongside limited access to climate adaptation strategies and long-term conservation resources.

The Monterey Bay region seeks to establish regional mechanisms to enable coordination among governmental, tribal, and nongovernmental entities to generate and allocate resources for open space protection, habitat restoration, and the long-term maintenance and stewardship of recreational lands, private working lands, floodplain and watershed lands, and to secure opportunities for the improvement of these lands and waters. These efforts are intended to address longstanding gaps in access to climate adaptation resources, infrastructure, and green space, particularly for rural and indigenous communities. A regional authority can help overcome these barriers by expanding and aligning resources, strengthening partnerships, and supporting coordinated implementation strategies.

The Authority is intended to function primarily as a regional funding and coordination entity. While the Authority will be vested with powers and duties comparable to a state conservancy, unlike many conservancies, the Authority is not intended to acquire or own real property. Instead, it will award grants and support projects carried out by local governments, tribes, nonprofit organizations, agricultural landowners, and conservation partners. According to the author's office, this structure allows the Authority to complement the many entities already working in the region by helping sustain the long-term stewardship of lands and waters once they are protected or restored.

Another key distinction between the Authority and a state conservancy is how funding can be generated. Conservancies generally rely on legislative appropriations and statewide bond funding. By contrast, the Authority will provide the region with a mechanism to place a funding measure before voters and generate dedicated regional funding if approved. This structure allows the region to secure more stable and flexible resources for long-term stewardship.

In that sense, the model for the Authority is closer to the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority, which was created to address a regionally identified funding gap and works alongside the Coastal Conservancy rather than replacing it.

- 5) **Working lands.** Working lands include lands used for farming, grazing, or the production of forest products, and collectively cover roughly half of the Monterey region. Grazing dominates most of those lands (~80% of working lands are rangeland). Timber production represents 3% of the working lands (307,000 acres) according to a US Forest Service inventory, and accounts for several hundred local jobs. Agricultural production covers 12-17% of the lands across the region and, according to the Monterey Farm Bureau, produces more than 150 crops and contributes an estimated impact greater than \$11.7 billion on the local economy.

Big Creek Lumber Company expresses concern that the structural farmwork of the Authority presents unintended risks to timber operations and the broader regional timber supply chain. They specifically note concern about the Authority funding land acquisitions through the use of eminent domain; potential for future taxes or fees being levied on working lands to support the Authority's budget; and, maintaining working lands as working lands to prevent acreage remove from production.

To provide greater consistency with the bill's findings and declarations about working lands being critical to the region, the bill could protect these lands from unnecessary taxes and land acquisitions.

- 6) **Double referral.** This bill is also referred to the Assembly Local Government Committee.
- 7) **Committee amendments.** The *committee may wish to consider* amending the bill to prohibit the use of eminent domain for land acquisition and qualify consideration of Authority-levied assessments on working lands.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

350 Bay Area Action
 Amah Mutsun Land Trust
 Audubon California
 Big Sur Land Trust
 California Marine Sanctuary Foundation
 California Outdoor Recreation Partnership
 Ecology Action
 Elkhorn Slough Foundation
 Esselen Tribe of Monterey County
 Green Foothills
 Land Trust of Santa Cruz County
 Peninsula Open Space Trust
 Protect San Benito
 R.e.a.c.h. San Benito Parks Foundation
 Regional Water Management Foundation
 Resource Conservation District of Santa Cruz County

San Benito Agricultural Land Trust
San Benito Resource Conservation District
Santa Clara Valley Bird Alliance
Santa Cruz Mountains Trail Stewardship
Save Our Shores
Sempervirens Fund
The Climate Center
Trout Unlimited
Trust for Public Land
Ventana Wilderness Alliance
Wildlife Conservation Network

Opposition

Big Creek Lumber Company
California Forestry Association

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