
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

AB 53 (Ramos) - Native American tribes: fish and wildlife: conservation and mitigation lands

Version: July 2, 2026

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: August 3, 2026

Policy Vote: N.R. & W. 6 - 0

Mandate: No

Consultant: Ashley Ames

Bill Summary: This bill would make federally recognized tribes eligible recipients of grants and awards or grants and loans from the Wildlife Conservation Board's California Riparian Habitat Conservation Program and Inlands Wetlands Conservation Program, respectively; and would authorize federally-recognized tribes to enter into contracts or agreements with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to manage and operate certain lands, among other things.

Fiscal Impact:

- Cost pressures of an unknown but potentially significant amount (various funds) due to expanded CDFW and WCB grant, loan, and award eligibility.

Background:

California Native American tribes. As of 2024, there were approximately 110 federally recognized tribes in California and 78 entities petitioning for recognition. Federally recognized tribes have a unique government-to-government relationship with local, state, and federal entities, and are sovereign nations. Federally recognized tribes can create their own laws, governmental structure, and enrollment or membership rules for their land and citizens of their nation.

The Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) is a state grant-making agency established within the department in 1947 whose mission is to protect, restore, and enhance the state's "spectacular natural resources for wildlife and for the public's use and enjoyment in partnership with conservation groups, government agencies and the people of California." The WCB currently administers nearly 20 programs that support projects statewide, including, among others, the California Riparian Habitat Conservation Program (CRHCP) and the Inland Wetlands Conservation Program (IWCP). The former has the purpose and goal of protecting, preserving, and restoring riparian habitats throughout the state, and the latter has the purpose and goal of carrying out the programs of the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture.

CNRA's 2026 California Tribal Stewardship Policy. In 2026 CNRA released the California Tribal Stewardship Policy (Policy) which builds upon earlier efforts to establish a framework for CNRA's interaction with California Native American tribes. It "sets forth a vision for a new era of tribal-state partnerships in the spirit of truth and healing. This Policy recognizes tribes' role as the original stewards of lands and waters in California and seeks to institutionalize practices of tribal stewardship in the implementation of [CNRA]'s missions, regulations, policies, and programs..." Elements of the Policy include ancestral land return, collaboration, and tribal access built upon

respectful and durable agreements. The long-term goals of the Policy include to expand tribal stewardship to at least 7.5 million acres of land and coastal waters.

Recent executive orders (B-10-11 (2011), N-15-19 (2019), and N-82-20 (2020)) established the Tribal Advisor position in the Governor's Office, directed state agencies to communicate and consult with California Native American tribes to provide opportunities for meaningful input on the development of matters affecting tribal communities, apologized for the role of the state in committing historical wrongs and establishing a Truth and Healing Council, and directed CNRA to work with tribes in advancing the state's nature-based solutions priorities. In addition, Governor Newsom's Statement of Administrative Policy on Native American Lands directed all departments to identify opportunities for increased tribal access, co-management, and ancestral land return. According to the CNRA, several departments have already returned state owned lands including the department, the State Lands Commission, and the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy. Grants from the WCB have facilitated these efforts.

Proposed Law: This bill would:

1. Add federally recognized tribes to eligible recipients of:
 - a. Awards and grants from the WCB's California Riparian Habitat Conservation Program
 - b. Grants and loans from the WCB's Inland Wetlands Conservation Program.
2. Add federally recognized tribes to those entities CDFW can enter into contracts or other agreements with for the management and operation of department-managed lands.
3. Declare that it is the intent of the Legislature to enact subsequent legislation that would develop a faster public process for the Department of Fish and Wildlife to return lands that meet certain criteria to federally recognized tribes.
4. Make minor and technical changes.

Related Legislation:

AB 900 (Papan, Chapter 385, Statutes of 2025) requires CNRA to prepare a section on stewardship for the 2027 annual report on 30x30 goals in collaboration with stakeholders, California Native American tribes, and state agencies, including with recommendation for increasing tribal stewardship of conservation lands and increasing ancestral land return, as provided.

AB 1284 (Ramos, Chapter 657, Statutes of 2024) encourages CNRA and its departments to enter into meaningful co-management and co-governance agreements for the management of natural resources.

AB 379 (Gallager, Chapter 701, Statutes of 2021) makes California Native American tribes eligible for many WCB programs, among other provisions.

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