

Date of Hearing: May 7, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

AB 721 (Soria) – As Amended April 23, 2025

Policy Committee: Natural Resources

Vote: 14 - 0

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: Yes

Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill creates the Huron Hawk Conservancy (Conservancy) within the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) to acquire and manage open-space lands and public lands within the Hurok Hawk area and to provide recreational, open space, wildlife habitat restoration and protection, and lands for educational uses within the area.

Specifically, this bill, among other things:

- 1) Creates the Conservancy as a state agency within CNRA and specifies the powers, duties, and limitations of the Conservancy and the board of directors (board).
- 2) Establishes the Huron Hawk Conservancy Fund (Fund) in the State Treasury and makes moneys in the Fund available for expenditure by the Conservancy, upon appropriation, for purposes of this bill. The bill authorizes the Conservancy to accept revenue generated and contributed to the Conservancy by member agencies, as defined, which the bill requires be deposited into the Fund.
- 3) Specifies members of the Conservancy's board as well as term-limit, compensation, quorum, and voting requirements for the board. Requires the board to adopt rules and procedures for the conduct of business by the Conservancy.
- 4) Provides that the bill becomes operative only upon appropriation by the Legislature in the annual Budget Act for purposes of the Conservancy, or upon approval of a general obligation bond authorizing funds for purposes of the Conservancy.

For a detailed summary of the bill's provisions, please see the Assembly Natural Resources Committee analysis of this bill.

FISCAL EFFECT:

- 1) CNRA will incur significant ongoing General Fund costs to establish and operate the Conservancy. CNRA estimates ongoing annual costs of approximately \$2 million. Of this amount, CNRA estimates \$1.5 million would fund eight new staff (one executive officer, one associate governmental program analyst, and six wildlife habitat assistants) and \$500,000 would fund contracts for administrative services, such as accounting, human resources, IT, and legal, as well as costs associated with communications, outreach, and board meeting logistics. This estimate is predicated on the assumption that the proposed Hurok Hawk

Conservancy will mirror other small state conservancies housed under CNRA and will acquire and manage land in perpetuity. CNRA notes that as the Conservancy completes more land acquisition projects over the next ten years, it may require additional permanent staff.

- 2) Ongoing cost pressures of an unknown but significant amount, likely in the millions of dollars, for the Conservancy to implement projects, programs, and activities consistent with its mission (General Fund, Huron Hawk Conservancy Fund, future bond funds).
- 3) Minor and absorbable costs to the Department of Fish and Wildlife, Wildlife Conservation Board, Department of Parks and Recreation, and State Lands Commission.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

Conservancies offer an opportunity to support projects to the benefit of the natural environment and local communities. The defined Huron Hawk area stands as a vacant 3,000 acre plot of land home to a multitude of flora and fauna alongside a local community readily interested in projects to improve the site. However, there is an absence of any central entity or governmental body to facilitate the funding and development of these projects. The establishment of the Huron Hawk Conservancy would promote equitable access to a healthy environment for the underserved Central Valley region.

- 2) **Background.**

State Conservancies. There are 11 conservancies under CNRA that are charged with the protection and preservation of the lands within their statutorily specified jurisdictions. The conservancies also work to provide recreational opportunities, facilitate climate adaptation, connect people to the regional landscapes, and bring state investments to the region. Every conservancy typically has a governing board, mission statement, geographic territory, and stipulated powers, duties, and limitations.

Huron Hawk Area. The San Luis Canal Westside Detention Basin within Fresno County and near the City of Huron is the largest publicly owned riparian habitat in the Tulare Basin and consists of an area with important opportunities for ecological, recreational, educational, and economic benefits to the neighboring central valley area.

The project site is owned by the United States Bureau of Reclamation and co-managed by the Department of Water Resources, in addition to being monitored by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. The author notes the area has 3,000 acres of unique and unutilized potential that can support nearby communities. The author further contends that while many local groups have expressed interest in conducting projects that can improve the site and provide environmental, educational, and recreational benefits to the region, no central entity exists to coordinate projects or collect and distribute funding, and no existing conservancy contains this site in its jurisdiction.

Writing in support, the Fresno Council of Governments contends a conservancy “could centralize projects at the Detention Basin site, help collect funding, and provide an opportunity for local leaders to provide input on their benefits.”

- 3) **Prior Legislation.** SB 583 (Padilla), Chapter 583, Statutes of 2024, created the Salton Sea Conservancy, contingent upon passage of the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024.

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