
SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Josh Becker, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 1108 **Hearing Date:** March 24, 2026
Author: Caballero
Version: February 17, 2026 Introduced
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: Edith Hannigan

Subject: Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy

SUMMARY

This bill would establish the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy within the California Natural Resources Agency, codify the geographic scope of the Grassland Ecological Area and Focus Area, establish the administrative structure and functions of the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy, and create the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy Fund.

BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

Touch grass. The 240,000 acre federal Grassland Ecological Area, located in Merced County, constitutes the largest remaining wetland complex in the Western United States. It is a major wintering group for migratory waterfowl and shorebirds along the Pacific Flyway. The lands in this area are primarily managed for waterfowl habitat and include seasonally flooded wetlands, permanent wetlands, and irrigated pasture. There are a number of state wildlife areas, state parks, and national wildlife refuges in these Central Valley grasslands.

Existing Law:

- 1) Establishes ten regional Conservancies in the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) and associated corresponding accounts to fund the Conservancies. Examples include:
 - a) Establishes the California Tahoe Conservancy and the Tahoe Conservancy Fund (Government Code (GOV) §§66906, 66905.10).
 - b) Establishes the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Fund (Public Resources Code (PRC) §§33200, 33103).
 - c) Establishes the State Coastal Conservancy and the State Coastal Conservancy Fund (PRC §§31100, 31011).

PROPOSED LAW

This bill would:

- 1) Designate portions of Merced County as the “Grassland Ecological Area” and the “Grassland Focus Area.”
- 2) Establish the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy (Conservancy) as a state agency within CNRA.

- 3) Establish the governing board of the Conservancy consisting of nine voting and two non-voting members, including:
 - a) The Secretary of the Natural Resources Agency, or their designee.
 - b) The Director of Fish and Wildlife, or their designee.
 - c) One public member, who is not an elected official, appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly.
 - d) One public member, who is not an elected official, appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules.
 - e) Five members to represent local and regional interests within or affecting the Grassland Ecological Area and the Grassland Focus Area, as follows:
 - i) The General Manager of the Grassland Water District, or their designee.
 - ii) A supervisor of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Merced, appointed by that board, or their designee, and that is a resident of the County of Merced.
 - iii) One member appointed by the Governor who is a landowner in the Grassland Ecological Area and owns the land exclusively for the purpose of habitat protection.
 - iv) One member appointed by the Governor who is a landowner in the Grassland Ecological Area and owns or operates an agricultural operation.
 - v) One member appointed by the Governor who is an employee of a nongovernmental organization that is an active member of the Central Valley Joint Venture.
 - f) Two non voting liaison advisors.
- 4) Establish additional administrative authorities and restrictions on the Conservancy.
- 5) Establish the powers of the Conservancy.
- 6) Establish authorities and restrictions related to the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy Fund, which would be created by the bill.
- 7) Require, beginning January 1, 2028 and annually thereafter, the Conservancy to send a report to the Legislature and Secretary of CNRA regarding the activities of the Conservancy.
- 8) Make legislative findings and declarations related to the purpose of the bill.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT

According to the author, "The Grasslands Ecological Area (GEA), located in Merced County within the Central Valley, is the single largest wetland, grassland and working land complex west of the Mississippi. It provides critical habitat for migratory bird species and essential local opportunities for education and recreation. Yet as climate, water, pollution, and development risks increase, there is a need to ensure coordinated efforts among public agencies, [non-governmental organizations], landowners and working lands to preserve this vital habitat. SB 1108 will ensure this by establishing the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy, which will operate incentive based and voluntary programs to preserve the wetlands. The Conservancy will equip landowners

and communities with the tools and resources necessary to navigate an uncertain future, ensuring preservation of California's largest wetland complex for generations to come."

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION

None received.

COMMENTS

Internationally recognized geography. The Grassland Ecological Area in the Central Valley in the San Joaquin River Basin is the largest remaining contiguous block of freshwater wetlands in California. According to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands:

It consists of semipermanent and permanent marshes, riparian corridors, vernal pool complexes, wet meadows, native uplands and grasslands, featuring Alkali Sacaton grassland *Sporobolus airoides* and the endemic Delta button celery, *Eryngium racemosum*. The site is renowned for its wintering waterbirds which reach several hundred thousands every winter. These include Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*), 19 duck species (Northern pintail *Anas acuta*; Green-winged teal *Anas crecca*; Northern shoveler *Anas clypeata*; Canvasbacks *Aythya valisineria* and others), 6 species of geese, tens of thousands of shorebirds (most abundantly Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and Long-billed dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*). The site is home to four endangered shrimps as well [as] the threatened Giant garter snake *Thamnophis gigas*.

While the hydrology of the valley has been altered due to flood control and irrigation projects, historic flood patterns are mimicked through pulses of high water during winter and spring through a system of canals and control structures.

Government, government everywhere. The area of the San Joaquin Valley to be included in this proposed conservancy is managed by:

- 5 Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs)
- 8 water and irrigation districts
- 2 Resource Conservation Districts (RCDs)
- 4 state wildlife areas
- 1 state park and
- 6 units of the national wildlife refuge system.

A state conservancy would allow for a coordinated land and water protection framework. For example, the author's office estimates that at least 60,000 acres of irrigated farmland within the proposed conservancy must be taken out of production to achieve groundwater sustainability within the next ten years. CNRA and the California Department of Transportation have also identified areas in the proposed Conservancy

as the key remaining corridor to restore wildlife connectivity between the Sierra Nevada foothills and the Coast Range. A state conservancy can help accomplish an ecologically and economically sustainable transition for these landscapes.

Maps in progress. The Grasslands Water District is in the final stages of developing specific maps delineating the 366,000 acre area to be managed under the proposed Conservancy. Once those maps are filed with the Secretary of State, the author plans to amend this bill to reflect the date of filing and establish the boundaries of the Conservancy in statute.

Related Legislation

AB 392 (Atkins, Chapter 622, Statutes of 2015) created the San Diego River Conservancy.

AB 2452 (Costa, Chapter 1012, Statutes of 1992) created the San Joaquin River Conservancy.

SB 2862 (Presley, Chapter 977, Statutes of 1990) created the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy.

SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS: None

SUPPORT

Grassland Water District (sponsor)

OPPOSITION

None Received

-- END --