
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

SB 1108 (Caballero) - Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy

Version: April 7, 2026

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: April 13, 2026

Policy Vote: N.R. & W. 7 - 0

Mandate: Yes

Consultant: Ashley Ames

Bill Summary: This bill would establish the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy within the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) as well as create the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy Fund.

Fiscal Impact:

- CNRA estimates ongoing costs of \$2 million annually (Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy Fund) for the establishment and operation of the new conservancy. Assuming this conservancy would mirror other small state conservancies and would also acquire and manage land in perpetuity, CNRA anticipates needing 8 positions to provide board, programmatic, and administrative support. These costs could increase as the conservancy completes land acquisition projects; CNRA estimates that after 10 years these additional costs could be around \$2 - \$3 million annually. The \$2 million estimate includes operational funding of \$500,000 per year to contract for administrative services, such as accounting, human resources, IT, and legal, and to pay for other costs such as communications, outreach, and board meeting logistical costs.
- Unknown but potentially significant ongoing cost pressures (bond funds or other funds) to provide additional funding for projects, land acquisitions, maintenance, and other activities that occur as a result of establishing a new conservancy.

Background: 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.

Proposed Law: 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. Specifically, it 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.

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.

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