

Date of Hearing: June 22, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Isaac G. Bryan, Chair

SB 1108 (Caballero) – As Amended April 7, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 37-1

SUBJECT: Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy

SUMMARY: Creates the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy (Conservancy) as a state agency within the Natural Resources Agency (NRA).

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the NRA, which oversees six state departments, 11 conservancies, 17 boards and commissions, 3 councils, and an urban park in Los Angeles that consists of two museums. (Government Code 12805)
- 2) Establishes 11 conservancies under NRA to oversee restoration projects, land acquisitions, and recreational opportunities, among other things, in their respective regional jurisdictions. (Public Resources Code (PRC) divisions 21-23.6)

THIS BILL:

- 1) Defines the following terms:
 - a) “Grassland Ecological Area” (GEA) as the portion of the County of Merced containing the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area, Grassland Water District, Grassland Resource Conservation District, Los Banos Wildlife Area, Volta Wildlife Area, Great Valley Grasslands State Park, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, and Merced National Wildlife Refuge, designated on, and specifically set forth in, the map called “Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy,” dated ____ 2026, and placed on file with the Secretary of State (SOS).
 - b) “Grassland Focus Area” (GFA) as the area of land surrounding the GEA that is recognized as a buffer of agricultural and other working landscapes that are compatible with wetland habitats and functions, designated on, and specifically set forth in, the map called “Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy,” dated ____ 2026, and placed on file with the SOS.
- 2) Establishes the Conservancy as a state agency within NRA to fulfill all of the following purposes, working in collaboration and cooperation with local governments and interested parties:
 - a) Protect, conserve, and restore the physical, cultural, archaeological, historical, and living resources of the GEA and the GFA, including migratory birds on the Pacific Flyway and other wildlife;
 - b) Provide increased opportunities for tourism and recreation;

- c) Aid in the preservation of working landscapes;
 - d) Reduce the risk of natural disasters, such as wildfires;
 - e) Protect and improve water and air quality;
 - f) Assist the regional economy through the operation of the conservancy's efforts;
 - g) Identify the highest priority projects and initiatives for which funding is needed;
 - h) Undertake efforts to enhance public and educational use and enjoyment of lands owned by the public;
 - i) Support efforts that advance both environmental preservation and the economic well-being of the region's residents in a complementary manner; and,
 - j) Support efforts that advance climate resilience and equity.
- 3) Requires the Board of the Conservancy (Board) to consist of specified voting and nonvoting members; requires members of the Board to serve specified terms and receive specified compensation; specifies processes for conducting business of the Board; and, requires the Board to adhere to the requirements of the Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act.
 - 4) Establishes the Conservancy's jurisdiction as being limited to the GEA and the GFA.
 - 5) Requires the Conservancy to carry out projects and activities throughout the GEA and the GFA.
 - 6) Authorizes the Conservancy to make grants or loans to specified entities in order to carry out the purposes of the Conservancy, including grants or loans provided to acquire an interest in real property. Requires grant or loan funds to be disbursed only after the recipient entity has entered into an agreement with the Conservancy.
 - 7) Authorizes the Conservancy to acquire an interest in real property. Authorizes the Conservancy to lease, rent, sell, exchange, or otherwise transfer an interest, option, or contractual right in real property, subject to terms and conditions. Prohibits the Conservancy from exercising the power of eminent domain.
 - 8) Authorizes the Conservancy to improve, restore, or enhance lands for the purpose of protecting wildlife habitat, conserving natural resources, improving public access or enjoyment of public lands, or otherwise meeting the specified objectives, and may carry out the planning and design of those improvements or measures.
 - 9) Authorizes the Conservancy to enter into agreements with public agencies, nonprofit organizations, or private entities for the construction, management, or maintenance of facilities authorized by the Conservancy.

- 10) Deposits all proceeds from a lease, rental, sale, exchange, or transfer of an interest or option in real property, and all other income, in the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy Fund (Fund) in the State Treasury. Requires monies in the Fund to be available, upon appropriation by the Legislature, only for the purposes of this bill.
- 11) Requires the Conservancy to cooperate and consult with the city or county where a grant is proposed or an interest in real property is proposed to be acquired, and, as necessary or appropriate, coordinate its efforts with other state agencies, in cooperation with the Secretary of NRA.
- 12) States that the Conservancy does not have the powers of a city or county to regulate land use; authority to regulate activities on land, except as the owner of an interest in land or pursuant to an agreement with, or a license or grant of management authority from, the owner of an interest in land; or, authority over water rights held by others.
- 13) Requires, beginning January 1, 2028, the Conservancy to submit an annual report to the Legislature and the Secretary of NRA regarding the activities of the conservancy, including expenditures, land management costs, and administrative costs.
- 14) Requires, if the Commission on State Mandates determines that this act contains costs mandated by the state, reimbursement to local agencies and school districts for those costs to be made.

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Senate Appropriations Committee, NRA estimates ongoing costs of \$2 million annually (Fund) for the establishment and operation of the new Conservancy. Additionally, the bill would result in 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.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **State conservancies.** There are currently 11 independent conservancies under NRA 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 for the aforementioned purposes. The current conservancies include:
 - Coastal Conservancy – established in 1976
 - Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC) – established in 1980
 - Tahoe Conservancy – established in 1985
 - Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy – established in 1991
 - San Joaquin River Conservancy – established in 1992
 - San Diego River Conservancy – established in 2003
 - Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy – established in 2010
 - San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy – established in 1999
 - Baldwin Hills and Urban Watersheds Conservancy – established in 2000

- Sierra Nevada Conservancy – established in 2004
- Salton Sea Conservancy – established in 2024

All conservancies have a governing board, mission statement, geographic territory, and stipulated powers, duties, and limitations.

Existing law also establishes the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) in the Department of Fish and Wildlife to provide a single and coordinated program for the acquisition of lands and facilities suitable for recreational purposes, and adaptable for conservation, propagation, and use of the fish and game resources of the state. The state's conservancies collaborate with the WCB to provide conservation and restoration programs and funding for the entire state.

2) **Grassland Ecological Area.** The GEA is designated on, and specifically set forth in, the map called "Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy." The area includes:

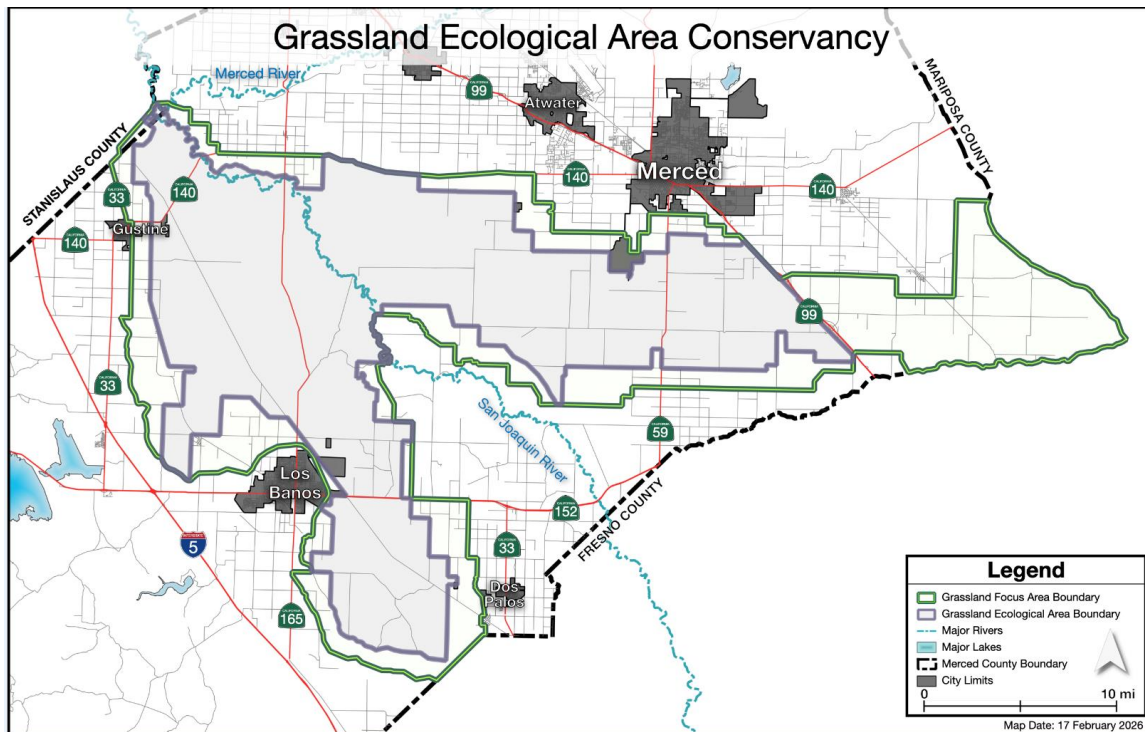
- Great Valley Grasslands State Park, which lies 25 miles west of Merced and is part of the larger GEA of federal, state, and private lands all managed for wildlife values.
- San Luis National Wildlife Refuge in Merced County, which encompasses more than 26,800 acres of wetlands, riparian woodlands, native grasslands, and vernal pools.
- Merced National Wildlife Refuge in Merced County, which encompasses more than 10,200 acres of wetlands, native grasslands, vernal pools, and riparian areas.
- Los Banos Wildlife Area, which is approximately 6,200 acres in Merced County.
- Volta Wildlife Area, which covers 3,800 acres of managed marsh and valley alkali shrub in the San Joaqui Valley near Los Banos.
- The Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (WMA) was established in 1979 and is located in western Merced County within the San Joaquin River basin. The WMA consists of 94,576 acres of perpetual conservation easements on private lands. Of this total acreage, 11,150 acres of service-owned fee-title land are managed as part of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, and 4,497 acres are managed as part of the Merced National Wildlife Refuge.

The GEA represents the largest remaining contiguous block of wetlands in California. Several rare and endangered plant and animal species inhabit the park, including alkali sacaton, a native bunch grass, and the Delta button celery, a state listed endangered species found in the flood plain of the San Joaquin River. Biologists have also reported the California Tiger Salamander and endangered vernal pool fairy shrimp and tadpole shrimp.

The WMA consists mostly of individual private lands and as these lands are privately-held; there is no public access onto them. Most of the lands that comprise the WMA consist of private waterfowl hunting clubs, as well as wildlife-friendly agricultural lands. Habitat management activities on hunting clubs--primarily intensive moist soil management within wetland basins--are conducted by the private landowners.

The GEA is an internationally recognized wildlife and wetland habitat area that hosts millions of migratory birds, supports threatened and endangered plants and wildlife, and provides one of the last remaining undeveloped corridors for wildlife movement across the San Joaquin Valley. The area is recognized under international treaty, federal law, local land use plans, and by conservation groups, but it does not have any state designation.

- 3) **This bill.** SB 1108 creates a new Conservancy within NRA with a nine-member appointed board to represent state and local interests. The Conservancy will have the ability to receive and distribute funding, partner with landowners, and acquire, protect, and enhance property for the purposes of protecting, conserving, and restoring the GEA and the surrounding GFA. (Map below of proposed Conservancy jurisdiction provided by the author's office.)



Two of the 11 current conservancies have maps on file with the SOS to designate their jurisdiction (SMMC (PRC 33105.5) and Coachella Valley (PRC 33502)); the rest of the conservancies have their jurisdictions described in geographic detail in their governing statutes.

All of the designated areas that make up the GEA -- the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area, Grassland Water District, Grassland Resource Conservation District, Los Banos Wildlife Area, Volta Wildlife Area, Great Valley Grasslands State Park, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, and Merced National Wildlife Refuge – have legally mapped perimeters, but the author notes that the complete GEA could include additional lands beyond those boundaries. SB 1108 defines the GEA and GFA based on respective maps that have yet to be filed with the SOS. In lieu of designating those boundaries with a yet-to-be-filed map, the author is working on a definition based on the detailed geography of the above map to amend into the bill in the next policy committee.

- 4) **Double referral.** This bill is also referred to the Assembly Water, Parks & Wildlife Committee.

5) Author's statement:

The 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, NGOs, 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.

6) Related legislation:

AB 2216 (Aguiar Curry) renames the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy Act to the Valley and Delta Conservancy Act, expands the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy's geographical jurisdiction, and establishes the Valley Program under the administration of the Conservancy to support efforts that advance the environmental protection and the economic well-being of Valley residents. This bill is referred to the Senate Rules Committee.

AB 2566 (Soria) establishes the Huron Hawk Conservancy in the California NRA. This bill was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

Audubon California
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
California Waterfowl Association
Defenders of Wildlife
Delta Waterfowl
Ducks Unlimited
East Merced Resource Conservation District
Environmental Defense Fund
Grassland Water District
Point Blue Conservation Science
River Partners
The Nature Conservancy

Opposition

None on file

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