
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Senator Blakespear, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 1253
Author: Laird
Version: 3/23/2026
Urgency: No
Consultant: Taylor McKie

Hearing Date: 4/22/2026
Fiscal: Yes

SUBJECT: Salinas Reservoir: recreational use

DIGEST: This bill prohibits recreation involving bodily contact in the Salinas Reservoir, unless specified conditions are satisfied.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Establishes as state policy that all public waters should be used for multiple purposes, to the extent that the uses are consistent with public health and public safety. (Health and Safety Code (HSC) § 115825(a))
- 2) Prohibits recreational use to include recreation in which there is bodily contact with the water by any participant in a reservoir in which water is stored for domestic use. (HSC § 115825(b))
- 3) Specifies conditions in which recreational use may include recreation in which there is bodily contact with the water in specified reservoirs, including San Diego County, Modesto, Nacimiento, Sly Park, Canyon Lake, and Bear Lake. (HSC § 115840 et seq.)
- 4) Requires all water supply reservoirs of a public agency to be open for recreational use by the people of the state, subject to regulations of the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) (HSC § 115830).

This bill:

- 1) Prohibits recreation in which a participant has bodily contact with the water in the Salinas Reservoir, unless both of the following conditions are satisfied:
 - a) The water subsequently receives complete water treatment, as specified; and
 - b) The reservoir is operated in compliance with the regulations of the State Water Board.

- 2) Requires the recreational use of the Salinas Reservoir to be subject to additional conditions and restrictions adopted by the entity operating the reservoir or required by the State Water Board to further protect or enhance public health and safety.
- 3) Declares the need for a special statute for the Salinas Reservoir.

Background

- 1) *The Salinas Reservoir.* The Salinas Dam was built in 1941 by the U.S. Army as a water conservation project to supply water to Camp San Luis Obispo and the City of San Luis Obispo. The construction of the dam formed the Salinas Reservoir (also known as Santa Margarita Lake). The Salinas Reservoir is located about 9 miles southeast of the Santa Margarita community in the County of San Luis Obispo, near the headwaters of the Salinas River. It captures water from a 112 square mile watershed and can store up to 22,320 acre-feet of water. Both the Salinas Dam and delivery system were subsequently transferred from the U.S. Army to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (US ACE).

In 1947, the US ACE entered into an agreement with the San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (District) for the operation and maintenance of the dam, its reservoir, and related facilities. The District operates the reservoir for the City of San Luis Obispo through the County Public Works Department under a lease from US ACE. The Salinas Reservoir is operated as a primary water supply for the City of San Luis Obispo.¹ No bodily contact (swimming, waterskiing, etc.) is allowed in the lake because it is a domestic water supply reservoir.

- 2) *Bodily contact with reservoir waters.* State law declares that it is the policy of the state that all public waters are to be used for multiple purposes, as long as the uses are consistent with public health and safety. To this end, existing law prohibits recreational use in which the participant has bodily contact with water in a reservoir in which water is stored for domestic use. Bodily contact with domestic water supplies can be a source of fecal pathogens and other contaminants that, if not treated, can be a serious threat to public health.

Existing law does provide exemptions from this bodily contact prohibition, however, for all reservoirs in San Diego County, the Nacimiento Reservoir, the Modesto Reservoir, the Sly Park Reservoir, the Canyon Lake Reservoir, and

¹ San Luis Obispo County. (2024). [Salinas Reservoir Water Quality Monitoring Report](#).

the Bear Lake Reservoir. In each of these cases, statute delineates health and safety requirements, including monitoring and treatment requirements, which must be met for the exemption to stay in effect. These reservoirs have unique circumstances relating to treatment, location, population served, and climate that have decreased the threat to public health associated with bodily contact in the reservoir.

This bill provides a similar exemption from the bodily contact prohibition for the Salinas Reservoir. In all cases, the water system operating Salinas Reservoir and providing treatment to the drinking water are responsible (and have accepted responsibility) for ensuring that drinking water meets drinking water standards and public health is protected.

Comments

- 1) *Purpose of Bill.* According to the author, “Senate Bill 1253 authorizes swimming and expanded recreation at Santa Margarita Lake in San Luis Obispo County under stringent sanitation requirements to ensure continued compliance with water quality standards. The Salinas Reservoir, which forms Santa Margarita Lake, serves as a vital drinking water source for the City of San Luis Obispo. While bodily contact was historically restricted, modern advancements in water treatment and monitoring now allow for these activities to be conducted safely. Certain recreation access is already allowed, such as boating, kayaking, rowing, and more. SB 1253 permits recreational activities involving body contact with water, subject to rigorous water quality protocols and advanced treatment requirements to protect the public water supply.”
- 2) *Senate Natural Resources and Water amendments.* Due to time constraints, the Senate Environmental Quality Committee will take the amendments that the author accepted in the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee on April 14, 2026. As discussed in the committee analysis for the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee, reasonings for these amendments are outlined below:
 - a) *Adding reporting requirements.* The Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee amended SB 1253 to be consistent with previously granted bodily-contact exemptions and include a reporting requirement for the Salinas Reservoir that is similar to those imposed on other reservoirs previously granted an exemption.

- b) *Adding a sunset.* According to the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee, “To ensure that the water supply is not being adversely affected by the allowance of bodily contact, the committee may wish to amend the bill to sunset its provisions after 5 years, on January 1, 2032, giving the Legislature an opportunity review the appropriateness of the exemption.”
- 3) *Water quality monitoring at the reservoir.* Under a supplemental agreement, the County of San Luis Obispo is required to evaluate existing water quality conditions, identify any water quality problems, and establish an appropriate monitoring program to include chemical, limnological, and bacteriological parameters.¹ The monitoring program was established using the guidelines published by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (CCRWQCB) in the Water Quality Control Plan for the Central Coast Basin Plan.² Water quality monitoring is conducted by the County’s Water Quality Laboratory and Water Treatment Operators.

The County has established a routine sampling schedule for organic, inorganic, general mineral, lake nutrients, bacteriological, and physical analyses at the Salinas Reservoir, its tributaries, and reservoir releases. Different parameters are sampled at different frequencies. Parameters such as iron, manganese, algae, odor, and turbidity are sampled monthly, and other parameters such as coliform bacteria (total and E. coli), nitrate, and phosphate are analyzed quarterly.¹

Drinking water systems with surface water sources must comply with the Long-Term 2 Enhanced Surface Water Treatment Rule³, which was established to reduce the risk of disease caused by *Cryptosporidium* and other microorganisms, which are associated with bodily contact. The U.S. EPA estimates that full compliance with this rule will reduce the incidence of illness associated with these microorganisms by 89,000 to approximately 1.4 million cases per year.⁴ The rule requires that the permitted community water system, which is the City of San Luis Obispo in this case, collect samples for E. coli or *Cryptosporidium*. The County conducts bacteriological analyses of coliform to evaluate general water quality.¹

² Central Coast Region Regional Water Quality Control Board. (2024). [Water Quality Control Plan for the Central Coastal Basin](#).

³ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2025). [Long Term 2 Enhanced Surface Water Treatment Rule Documents](#).

⁴ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2005). [Fact Sheet – Long Term 2 Enhanced Surface Water Treatment Rule](#).

DOUBLE REFERRAL:

This measure was heard in Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee on April 14, 2026, and passed out of committee with a vote of 7-0.

Related/Prior Legislation

AB 440 (Bigelow, Chapter 54, Statutes of 2021) modified the conditions required for the Bear Lake Reservoir bodily contact exemption and extended the operation of the exemption indefinitely.

SB 143 (Stone, 2105) would have exempted the Diamond Valley Reservoir from the prohibition against bodily contact with water if certain conditions were met. This bill was cancelled at the request of the author in the Senate Environmental Quality Committee.

SB 930 (Gaines, Chapter 149, Statutes of 2016) extended the sunset on the bodily contact exemption for Bear Lake Reservoir until January 1, 2022, and required the Lake Alpine Water Company to file a biennial report file with the Legislature on the recreational uses at Bear Lake Reservoir and the water treatment program for that reservoir.

SB 14 (Gaines, Chapter 172, Statutes of 2013) authorized, until January 1, 2017, recreational uses at Bear Lake Reservoir, if certain conditions are met, including water treatment, monitoring, and reporting requirements.

SB 1063 (Gaines, 2012) would have authorized, until January 1, 2016, recreational uses at Bear Lake Reservoir if certain conditions are met, including water treatment, monitoring, and reporting requirements. SB 1063 was vetoed by Governor Brown.

AB 1934 (Leslie, Chapter 374, Statutes of 2004) authorized recreational uses, until January 1, 2007, at Bear Lake Reservoir if certain conditions are met.

SOURCE: County of San Luis Obispo Board of Supervisors

SUPPORT:

County of San Luis Obispo

OPPOSITION:

None received

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