
CONSENT

Bill No: SB 1253
Author: Laird (D)
Amended: 4/27/26
Vote: 21

SENATE NATURAL RES. & WATER COMMITTEE: 7-0, 4/14/26
AYES: Becker, Seyarto, Allen, Cabaldon, Cortese, Grove, Stern

SENATE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COMMITTEE: 7-0, 4/22/26
AYES: Blakespear, Valladares, Allen, Dahle, Gonzalez, Hurtado, Menjivar

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE: Senate Rule 28.8

SUBJECT: Salinas Reservoir: recreational use

SOURCE: County of San Luis Obispo

DIGEST: This bill exempts the Salinas Reservoir from the general prohibition against bodily contact with water stored in a reservoir for domestic use if certain conditions are met.

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, for reservoirs that store water for domestic use, from allowing recreation where there is bodily contact with the water, except as specifically provided for in statute (HSC §115825(b)). Statutory exemptions have been provided in various instances, including exemptions for San Diego County (HSC §115840), Modesto Reservoir (HSC §115840.5), Nacimiento Reservoir

(HSC §115841), Sly Park Reservoir (HSC §115842), Canyon Lake Reservoir (HSC §115843.5), and Bear Lake Reservoir (HSC §115843.6).

- 3) 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).
- 4) Authorizes a public agency operating any water supply reservoir that is open for recreation use to charge a use fee to cover the costs of policing the area around the reservoir (HSC §115845).
- 5) 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 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) Requires, two years after approval of the changed use of the reservoir to a body contract reservoir, and every two years thereafter, the San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District to file a specified report on the recreational uses at the Salinas Reservoir and the water treatment program for that reservoir.
- 4) Repeals this exemption on January 1, 2032.
- 5) Declares the need for a special statute for the Salinas Reservoir.

Background

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. According to the County of San Luis Obispo's website, the Salinas Reservoir serves as one of the City of San Luis Obispo's primary water supply sources.

Recreation facilities at Salinas Reservoir are operated by the County of San Luis Obispo as a county park with opportunities for boating, fishing, picnicking, and camping. No bodily contact (swimming, waterskiing, etc.) is allowed in the lake because it is a domestic water supply reservoir. While swimming is not allowed in the Salinas Reservoir, there is a swimming pool that is open on a limited schedule. According to its website, the Salinas Reservoir is known for its excellent fishing and peaceful boating atmosphere. San Luis Obispo County Parks conducts mandatory boat inspections at the reservoir to prevent the spread of Quagga, Zebra, and Golden Mussels and other invasive species, and, earlier this year, started requiring a 30-day quarantine for boats with internal ballasts or ballast bags (e.g. wakeboard and ski boats). There are individual picnic sites with shade, ample seating, larger barbecues, and other amenities throughout the park. The park also has a range of hiking and riding trails that offer views of the lake and surrounding mountains.

According to the reservoir's Water Quality Monitoring Report for Water Year 2024 (October 2023 – September 2024), prepared by the County of San Luis Obispo Department of Public Works Water Quality Division, "water quality parameters were typical of historical data throughout the reservoir, with no significant anomalies observed."

Bodily contact with water in California reservoirs. The HSC establishes as state policy 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 uses 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 the Bear Lake Reservoir. In each of these cases, statute delineates health and safety requirements, including monitoring and treatment requirements, which must be met in order for the exemption to stay in effect. These reservoirs have unique circumstances relating to treatment, location, population served, and climate that have decreased the risk associated with bodily contact in the reservoir. California Water Code makes an additional exemption for bodily contact with water in reservoirs constructed and operated as part of the State Water Project, to the extent that the recreation is compatible with public health and safety requirements.

In all cases, the water system operating the 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

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. 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. 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.

Drinking water systems with surface water sources must comply with the Long-Term 2 Enhanced Surface Water Treatment Rule, which was established to reduce the risk of disease caused by Cryptosporidium and other microorganisms, which are associated with bodily contact. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 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. 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.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: Yes

SUPPORT: (Verified 5/11/26)

County of San Luis Obispo (sponsor)

OPPOSITION: (Verified 5/11/26)

None received

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: 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.”

Prepared by: Genevieve Wong / N.R. & W. / (916) 651-4116
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