

Date of Hearing: June 30, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

SB 1253 (Laird) – As Amended June 10, 2026

**SENATE VOTE:** 35-0

**SUBJECT:** Salinas Reservoir: recreational use

**SUMMARY:** Authorizes recreational activities that involve bodily contact with water at the Salinas Reservoir (also called Santa Margarita Lake) if the water in the reservoir is subsequently treated to specified standards, water quality monitoring is in place, and other conditions are met. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Permits recreational activities that involve bodily contact with the water at the Salinas Reservoir if the following conditions are met:
  - a) The water subsequently receives complete water treatment, including oxidation, filtration, and disinfection, before being used for domestic purposes;
  - b) The San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (SLO District) conducts a monitoring program for *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia*, and total coliform bacteria at a location and frequency determined by the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board), and provides the monitoring results to water suppliers directly receiving the water via infrastructure within 30 days of receiving the results; and
  - c) Reservoir operations comply with the regulations of the State Water Board.
- 2) Provides recreational use at the Salinas Reservoir shall be subject to additional conditions and restrictions adopted by the entity operating the reservoir or the State Water Board that are required to protect and enhance public safety and do not conflict with regulations of the State Water Board.
- 3) Requires SLO District to report to the Legislature two years after the approval of the changed use of the Salinas Reservoir to a body contact reservoir, and every two years thereafter, on the recreational uses at the Salinas Reservoir and the water treatment program. The report shall include the following information:
  - a) The estimated levels and types of recreational uses at the reservoir on a monthly basis;
  - b) A summary of monitoring in the Salinas Reservoir watershed for *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia*, and total coliform bacteria, including *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) and fecal coliform;
  - c) The most current sanitary survey of the watershed and water quality monitoring;
  - d) As deemed necessary by the State Water Board, an evaluation of recommendations relating to inactivation and removal of *Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia*;

- e) Annual reports provided to the State Water Board as required by the water permit issued by the State Water Board;
  - f) An evaluation of the impact of source water quality due to recreational activities on the Salinas Reservoir, including any microbiological monitoring;
  - g) A summary of activities for operation of recreational uses and facilities in a manner that optimizes the water quality;
  - h) The reservoir management plan and the operations plan; and
  - i) The annual water reports submitted to the consumers each year.
- 4) Sunsets the permission for recreational activities that involve bodily contact with the water at the Salinas Reservoir on January 1, 2032.
- 5) Declares that a special statute is necessary to address the Salinas Reservoir because recreational activities, including boating, fishing, hiking, biking, and other activities, take place in the several thousand acres of open space surrounding the Salinas Reservoir. The County of San Luis Obispo manages the reservoir and its untreated water. The City of San Luis Obispo will continue effective water treatment through microfiltration and disinfection.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Declares it to be policy of the state that multiple uses should be made of all public water, to the extent that multiple use is consistent with public health and safety [Health and Safety Code (HSC) § 115825(a)].
- 2) Prohibits, for reservoirs in which water is stored for domestic use, recreational uses from including bodily contact with the water by any participant, except as provided under state law [HSC § 115825(b)].
- 3) Specifies—for Modesto, Nacimiento, Sly Park, Canyon Lake, and Bear Lake Reservoirs, and reservoirs located in San Diego County—conditions under which recreational uses may include bodily contact with the water (HSC § 115840, *et seq.*).

**FISCAL EFFECT:** Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

**COMMENTS:**

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** This bill authorizes swimming and expanded recreation at Salinas Reservoir in San Luis Obispo County under sanitation and monitoring requirements to ensure continued compliance with water quality standards. According to the author, “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. [This bill] 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) **Background.** State law generally prohibits recreational uses involving bodily contact with water at reservoirs that supply water for domestic use. This is because bodily contact with domestic water supplies can be a source of fecal pathogens and other contaminants that, if not treated, can pose serious threats to public health. However, there are many exceptions from this prohibition for specific bodies of water throughout the state, including all reservoirs in San Diego County and the Nacimiento, Modesto, Sly Park, Canyon Lake, and Bear Lake reservoirs.

For each exemption, state law delineates health and safety requirements, including monitoring and treatment requirements, that must be met in order for the exemption to remain in effect. In all cases, the water systems operating the reservoir and providing drinking water treatment are responsible for ensuring the protection of public health and compliance with drinking water standards.

*Salinas Dam.* The Salinas Reservoir (also known as Santa Margarita Lake) is located on the upper Salinas River, approximately nine miles southeast of the community of Santa Margarita. The project was originally built by the War Department in 1941 to ensure an adequate water supply for Camp San Luis Obispo, as well as the City of San Luis Obispo. The dam and appurtenances were declared surplus by the War Department on April 14, 1947 and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) assumed responsibility for the facilities. On July 11, 1947, the Corps entered into an agreement with SLO District for the operation and maintenance of the dam and related facilities. The City of San Luis Obispo has an agreement with the Corps for use of the reservoir, as well as a water rights permit to divert water from the Salinas River for storage within the reservoir.

Currently, no bodily contact (swimming, waterskiing, etc.) is allowed in Salinas Reservoir because it serves as one of the City of San Luis Obispo's primary water supply sources for its roughly 16,000 connections. Whale Rock and Nacimiento Reservoirs are the other major sources of water supply for the city and bodily contact with the water in Nacimiento Reservoir is permitted. Raw water flows from the Salinas Reservoir to the City of San Luis Obispo's water treatment plant (Stenner Creek Water Treatment Plant) where it is treated to drinking water standards using ozone as the primary disinfectant. The County of San Luis Obispo monitors water quality at the reservoir on a weekly basis and the City of San Luis Obispo regularly monitors water quality of the raw water it receives from the Salinas Reservoir at its treatment plant.

The County of San Luis Obispo manages the Salinas Reservoir/Santa Margarita Lake and the recreational amenities surrounding the reservoir as a regional park with opportunities for boating, fishing, picnicking, and camping. Beyond the developed area is the Santa Margarita Lake Natural Area that includes thousands of acres of open space and is accessible to hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians. The watershed draining into the reservoir is largely undeveloped and cattle ranching is common.

- 3) **Arguments in support.** The County of San Luis Obispo is the sponsor of this bill and writes it is a "practical and carefully structured path forward to allow limited passive (e.g.,, swimming, paddleboarding, kayaking, etc.) recreational water contact activities at the Salinas Reservoir (Santa Margarita Lake), while maintaining robust public health protections." The County maintains this bill "appropriately conditions such use on the continued application of advanced water treatment processes, including oxidation, filtration, and disinfection,

consistent with all applicable state and federal requirements.” Finally, the County of San Luis Obispo asserts this bill will support the Salinas Reservoir’s role as “a vital resource that supports recreation, tourism, and quality of life for residents and visitors alike.”

- 4) **Double referral.** This bill was heard in the Assembly Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee on June 16, 2026 where it passed 6-0.
- 5) **Related legislation.** AB 440 (Bigelow), Chapter 54, Statutes of 2021, modifies the conditions required for the Bear Lake Reservoir bodily contact exemption and extends operation of the exemption indefinitely.

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

SB 143 (Stone) of 2015 would have exempted the Diamond Valley Reservoir from the prohibition against bodily contact with water, if certain conditions were met. SB 143 was held in the Senate Environmental Quality Committee.

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

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

AB 80 (Blakeslee) of 2009 would have amended the water storage and treatment requirements for Nacimiento Reservoir. AB 80 died on the Assembly Floor.

SB 1046 (Senate Environmental Quality Committee), Chapter 253, Statutes 2007, extends the authorization for bodily contact with water at Canyon Lake Reservoir indefinitely.

AB 1934 (Leslie), Chapter 374, Statutes of 2004, authorizes recreational uses, until January 1, 2007, at Bear Lake Reservoir if certain conditions are met; required the Lake Alpine Water Company to file, on or before January 1, 2006, a report on the recreational uses at Bear Lake Reservoir.

AB 2439 (Haynes), Chapter 519, Statutes of 2004, authorizes bodily contact with water in the Canyon Lake Reservoir until January 1, 2008, if certain conditions are met; requires the Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District to file a specified report.

SB 1074 (Senate Environmental Quality Committee), Chapter 742, Statutes of 2003, extends the authorization for bodily contact with water at Modesto Reservoir indefinitely.

SB 1093 (Costa), Chapter 968, Statutes of 2002, authorizes bodily contact with water in the Sly Park Reservoir if certain conditions are met; requires the El Dorado Irrigation District to file a specified report.

SB 2201 (Monteith), Chapter 70, Statutes of 1998, authorizes recreational uses that included bodily contact with water, until January 1, 2004, at Modesto Reservoir if certain conditions are met.

AB 1460 (Bordonaro), Chapter 524, Statutes of 1997, authorizes recreational activity in which there is bodily contact with the water in the Nacimiento Reservoir if certain conditions are met.

**REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

**Support**

County of San Luis Obispo (sponsor)

**Opposition**

None on file

**Analysis Prepared by:** Pablo Garza / W., P., & W. / (916) 319-2096