

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 556 (Hurtado) – As Amended July 17, 2025

Policy Committee: Water, Parks and Wildlife

Vote: 13 - 0

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: No

Reimbursable: No

**SUMMARY:**

This bill requires, upon appropriation by the Legislature in the annual Budget Act or another statute for purposes of this bill, \$21.5 million be allocated to the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) for floodplain acquisition, habitat restoration, and associated conservation projects on floodplains in the Counties of Kern, Kings, and Tulare.

**FISCAL EFFECT:**

One-time cost, upon appropriation, of \$21.5 million (General Fund, bond funds, or other funds) for allocation to WCB for the purposes specified in the bill.

According to the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA), in the last 20 years, WCB has allocated over \$50 million for acquisition and restoration projects in Kern and Tulare counties. CNRA notes WCB has not received many requests for projects in Kings County.

**COMMENTS:**

1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

Multi-benefit floodplain restoration is highly cost-effective and produces numerous co-benefits beyond improved flood safety and groundwater recharge, including fish and wildlife habitat restoration, creation of good-paying jobs, natural carbon sequestration, clean water, and recreational opportunities for underserved Central Valley communities...Failure to make these common-sense investments will leave the Tulare Basin vulnerable to billions of dollars of future damage and sacrifice major opportunities to recharge groundwater and support the local agricultural economy.

2) **Background.** The Tulare Lake was once a terminal lake located in the southern San Joaquin Valley and the largest body of freshwater west of the Mississippi River. Settlers began draining the lake and diverting the rivers feeding it in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for agriculture, which is the primary land use in the basin today. Despite being drained long ago, the Tulare Lake basin intermittently refills and floods during wet winters when there is high runoff. These events allow for vestiges of the Tulare Lake to reappear, as happened during the wet winters of 1969, 1983, 1997, and, most recently, 2023.

The author cites major flooding events in the Tulare Lake basin that occurred in 2023 as part of the impetus for this bill. Starting in late 2022 and continuing into 2023, a series of atmospheric rivers pelted the region (and other areas of the state) causing extensive flooding and resulting in a declaration of a State of Emergency. The flooding led to the reemergence of the Tulare Lake and was exacerbated by the insufficient flood protection infrastructure in the region. Ultimately, floodwaters covered tens of thousands of acres before receding roughly one year later. All of the flooding resulted in crop losses, flood damage to homes, and job losses, potentially adding up to billions of dollars in damages.

According to River Partners, which writes in support of this bill, “The Tulare Basin has historically not received its fair share of state investment to meet critical needs, even compared to other portions of the Central Valley.”

While a prior version of this bill earmarked funding from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (Proposition 4), the current version does not specify a funding source. Proposition 4 allocates \$870 million to WCB for land acquisition; habitat enhancement and restoration; rangeland, grazing land, and grassland protection; inland wetland conservation; ecosystem restoration on agricultural lands; climate adaptation and resiliency; monarch butterfly and pollinator rescue; desert conservation; oak woodland conservation; and the Natural Heritage Preservation Tax Credit Act of 2000.

WCB’s primary purpose is to approve funding for wildlife habitat protection, restoration and wildlife-oriented public access projects. WCB administers nearly 20 programs, and staff work with project proponents to help develop and evaluate project proposals to determine if they are appropriate for funding. A coalition of conservation organizations that were previously opposed to but are now neutral on the bill contend it is important to “ensure WCB is able to review and approve projects through their well-established and respected public process.”