

SENATE THIRD READING

SB 653 (Cortese)

As Amended June 25, 2025

Majority vote

SUMMARY

Requires, for a grant program that funds an environmentally sensitive vegetation management project, a state public entity to consider incorporating into its funding guidelines specified criteria related to environmentally sensitive vegetation management.

Major Provisions

- 1) States the intent of the Legislature to encourage the use of environmentally sensitive vegetation management practices that maintain ecological health and strengthen biodiversity while mitigating wildfire risk.
- 2) Defines "environmentally sensitive vegetation management" as vegetation management that reduces catastrophic wildfire risk over the long term while supporting native wildlife and biodiversity.
- 3) Defines "type conversion" as the process of dominant native plant species, including, but not limited to, native shrubs, being significantly reduced or extirpated and nonnative species colonizing an area due to disturbance events, including, but not limited to, wildfire incidents. Provides that "type conversion" does not include the removal of native species to make room for other native, but underrepresented, vegetation.
- 4) Requires, for a grant program that funds an environmentally sensitive vegetation management project, a state public entity shall consider incorporating into its funding guidelines all of the following criteria:
 - a) Follows the principles of integrated pest management;
 - b) Implements measures to support native plant health and biodiversity;
 - c) Maximizes long-term risk reduction of catastrophic wildfire;
 - d) Uses monitoring plans, as determined by the funding entity, and incorporates monitoring before, during, and after vegetation management treatments;
 - e) Uses methods that mimic natural disturbance processes to maintain rare habitats;
 - f) Time vegetation management to minimize the potential impacts to wildlife and minimize the reproduction of invasive plants;
 - g) Minimizes erosion impacts from vegetation management;
 - h) Includes consultation with native plant botanists and land management experts;
 - i) Leaves buffers around bodies of water to protect watershed health;
 - j) Uses prescribed grazing where applicable;

- k) Avoids habitat type conversion; and,
- l) Implements measures to avoid impacts to rare or sensitive species and habitats, in consultation with relevant agencies.

COMMENTS

California faces increasing threats from catastrophic wildfires which are exacerbated by climate change, drought, and the spread of nonnative vegetation. Management of vegetation mitigates wildfire risks by reducing vegetation density and hazardous fuels to prevent wildfires from spreading uncontrollably. Vegetation management can include pruning of trees, removal dead trees and plants, brush thinning, grass trimming, invasive species removal, prescribed burning, mechanical or manual removal, pest management, and herbicide treatment.

Traditional vegetation management approaches, such as indiscriminate clearing and heavy mechanical treatments, can lead to unintended ecological consequences including the loss of native plant species, habitat degradation, and soil erosion. Environmentally sensitive vegetation management practices offer an alternative approach that balances wildfire risk reduction with ecological resilience, ensuring long-term benefits for biodiversity and habitat integrity.

SB 653 defines environmentally sensitive vegetation management as vegetation management that reduces catastrophic wildfire risk over the long term while supporting native wildlife and biodiversity. Environmentally sensitive vegetation management projects would be required to prioritize such practices as integrated pest management, consultation with native plant botanists and land management experts, prescribed grazing, and manage watershed protections, among other things.

The Climate Bond authorizes \$10 billion for various environmental projects and programs, and includes \$200 million for the Natural Resources Agency and the State Parks for forest health and watershed improvement projects in forests and other habitats. The bond requires projects to involve the restoration of natural ecosystem functions in very high, high, and moderate fire hazard areas and may include prescribed fire, cultural fire, environmentally sensitive vegetation management, land protection, science-based fuel reduction, watershed protection, carbon sequestration, protection of older fire-resistant trees, or improved forest health. While the bill does not provide any explicit direction related to appropriations authorized by the bond, the statutory changes made by the bill could inform the state entities funding vegetation management afforded by the bond.

According to the Author

Wildfires have been devastating to California communities. As the climate changes, these fires become increasingly dangerous and destructive. Vegetation management is an integral part of reducing wildfire risk in our state, but we must ensure that we manage vegetation responsibly. SB 653 ensures that projects related to environmentally sensitive vegetation management will prevent habitat degradation, enhance biodiversity, improve wildfire resilience, and ensure science-based approaches to vegetation management. This bill is an opportunity to balance our state's need to reduce dangerous fuels with the importance of protecting biodiversity in our unique and vulnerable natural lands.

Arguments in Support

A coalition of environmental groups writes that this bill is essential in addressing the increasing risks of catastrophic wildfires in California while ensuring that vegetation management practices protect biodiversity, prevent habitat degradation, and enhance wildfire resilience, and advances a holistic, long-term strategy for vegetation management that benefits both California's environment and its communities.

Arguments in Opposition

None on file

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, should a state agency, such as the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, choose to incorporate the criteria listed in the bill into its funding and granting guidelines, the agency would incur one-time costs of an unknown amount – ranging from minor and absorbable to the tens of thousands or low hundreds of thousands of dollars – to modify and update its guidelines. To the extent that applying the criteria listed in the bill to the selection and funding of environmentally sensitive vegetation management projects displaces or otherwise changes the projects that would have been funded absent this bill, this bill would result in cost pressures of an unknown, but potentially significant, amount, to fund those displaced projects.

VOTES**SENATE FLOOR: 36-0-4**

YES: Allen, Alvarado-Gil, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Cortese, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Hurtado, Jones, Laird, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Ochoa Bogh, Padilla, Pérez, Richardson, Rubio, Seyarto, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Strickland, Umberg, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

ABS, ABST OR NV: Limón, Niello, Reyes, Valladares

ASM NATURAL RESOURCES: 13-0-1

YES: Bryan, Alanis, Connolly, Flora, Garcia, Haney, Hoover, Kalra, Muratsuchi, Pellerin, Schultz, Wicks, Zbur

ABS, ABST OR NV: Ellis

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 14-0-1

YES: Wicks, Sanchez, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Ahrens, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache, Ta

ABS, ABST OR NV: Tangipa

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