
SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Josh Becker, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 949 **Hearing Date:** March 24, 2026
Author: Becker
Version: March 11, 2026 Amended
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: Edith Hannigan

Subject: Environmental protection: Natural Resources Agency: landscape of statewide significance: Santa Cruz Mountains

SUMMARY

This bill would establish the Santa Cruz Mountains, as specified, as a landscape of statewide significance that requires special protection.

BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

Significant ecological values in Santa Cruz. The Santa Cruz Mountains hold significant ecological value as a vital hotspot for biodiversity along California's central coast. The region supports over 350 locally rare native plant species, as well as federally and/or state listed endangered species, including the California red-legged frog and marbled murrelet, San Francisco garter snake, Zayante band-winged grasshopper, and the Santa Cruz black salamander.

Its forests and coast redwoods filter water that flows into some of the most critical watersheds in the state. In addition, roughly 5 million people are within 20 miles of this mountain range, creating intense pressure on its wildlife, recreation, and other natural resources.

Existing Law:

- 1) Establishes the Coyote Valley Conservation Program within the Santa Clara Valley Open-Space Authority and establishes the Coyote Valley as a resource of statewide significance facing intense development pressure and in need of restoration, conservation, and enhancement (Public Resources Code (PRC) §§35180 and 35182).
 - a) Requires Coyote Valley to be acknowledged as an area of statewide significance in local planning documents affecting land use within Coyote Valley.
 - b) Allocates 25 million dollars to the Coyote Valley Conservation Program, via the State Coastal Conservancy (PRC §91032; The Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (Proposition 4)).
- 2) Establishes the East Bay Hills Conservation Program within East Bay Regional Parks and establishes the East Bay Hills as a resource of statewide cultural, historical, and environmental significance facing development pressures and impacts from growing urbanization which threaten their ecological integrity and recreational value (PRC §5598).

- a) Requires the East Bay Hills be acknowledged as an area of statewide significance in local land use policy documents affecting land use within the area (PRC §5598(g)).
- b) Allows the Department of Fish and Wildlife to consider, when determining the value of compensatory mitigation credits for wildlife connectivity actions, improved connectivity in critical terrestrial habitats in the Santa Cruz Mountains, among other locales (Fish and Game Code (FGC) §1957(c)(4)).

PROPOSED LAW

This bill would:

- 1) Define the geographic scope of the “Santa Cruz Mountains.”
- 2) Designate the Santa Cruz Mountains as a landscape of statewide significance requiring special protection, as defined in PRC §90100.
- 3) Require the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) and its boards, departments, and conservancies to encourage collaborative stewardship approaches that support:
 - a) Protection, restoration, and preservation of the Santa Cruz Mountains’ natural ecosystems.
 - b) Restoration and preservation of wildlife habitat in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
 - c) Promotion of healthy forest management in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
 - d) Improvement of watershed management in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
 - e) Development and maintenance of trails for public access and other recreational opportunities in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
 - f) Promotion of the long-term sustainability and conservation of working lands in the Santa Cruz Mountains to ensure they remain viable while contributing to the region’s overall environmental health.
 - g) Collaboration with local tribes to protect tribal cultural resources, partner on restoration and management efforts, and support opportunities for tribal access, cultural practices, and the potential for co-management of ancestral lands in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
 - h) Promotion of voluntary stewardship on public and private lands in the Santa Cruz Mountains through technical assistance, conservation easements, incentive programs, and multibenefit projects that contribute to the landscape-level goals of ecological health and climate resilience.
- 4) Establish that sections 1) – 3) above shall not be construed as authorizing CNRA to impose additional regulatory requirements on land use or working lands in the Santa Cruz Mountains.
- 5) Make related and supporting findings and declarations.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT

According to the author, “The Santa Cruz Mountains are one of the California’s most important natural landscapes- not just because of their ecological value, but because of their direct connection to millions of Californians. Few natural landscapes play such a

direct role in protecting the health, safety, water supply, and quality of life of so many people. “

“In addition to the biological uniqueness, the region plays a critical role in sustaining ecological processes that support the broader landscape, including providing critical water infrastructure and working lands.”

“Despite their ecological and recreational importance, there are currently no statewide policies that formally recognize the distinctiveness of the Santa Cruz Mountains. By enshrining the Santa Cruz Mountains in statute as an area of statewide significance, the Natural Resources Agency and its boards, departments, and conservancies will be better equipped to protect, restore, and preserve the natural ecosystems, habitats, and watersheds, while supporting healthy forest management alongside advancing public access and recreational opportunities.”

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION

None received.

COMMENTS

Inconsistent application of “significant landscapes.” There is no defined term in statute for a resource or landscape of statewide significance, except in PRC §2727 of the Surface Mining and Reclamation Act of 1975, which defines an “area of statewide significance” as “an area designated by the board pursuant to Section 2790 which is known to contain a deposit of minerals, the extraction of which is judged to be of prime importance in meeting future needs for minerals in the state and which, if prematurely developed for alternate incompatible land uses, could result in the permanent loss of minerals that are of more than local or regional significance.”

There is no similar definition for significant above-ground resources, such as the cultural, historical, and ecological values identified in this bill. So far, the Legislature has determined the East Bay Hills and the Coyote Valley to be *resources* of statewide significance and has allocated money in the annual budget to preserve and protect Coyote Valley, specifically. The Committee may wish to recommend that the author amend this bill to designate the Santa Cruz Mountains as a resource of statewide significance for internal consistency within the bill and for consistency with the previously designated landscapes (See AMENDMENT 1).

No associated Conservation Program? Both of the bills authorizing those resources of significance created managing programs for those areas within existing regional parks and open space districts (East Bay Regional Parks/East Bay Hills Conservation Program and Santa Clara Open Space Authority/Coyote Valley Conservation Program, respectively). These programs are specifically structured to provide authorities to the conservation programs to address the resource and recreational goals of their respective geographies, and have a regional coordinating agency through which funds may be allocated.

This bill establishes the Santa Cruz Mountains as a landscape of statewide significance, but does not establish an accompanying conservation program to administer programs to implement the “special protection” for the area called for in the bill. Instead, SB 949 requires the CNRA and its boards, departments, and conservancies to encourage

collaborative stewardship approaches that support those protections. Without such a conservation program, it is unclear who's responsibility and authority it is to implement the protection called for in the bill.

As the bill moves forward through the Legislative process, the author may wish to consider additional amendments to align this designation with the previous designations of resources of statewide significance which may include:

- 1) Establishing a conservation program within an existing regional park or open space district to administer and implement funding and projects to protect the area, rather than state agencies; and
- 2) Requiring local land use planning documents affecting the Santa Cruz Mountains to include an acknowledgement of the statewide significance of this resource.

Related Legislation

SB 392 (Grayson, Chapter 754, Statutes of 2025) established the East Bay Hills as a resource of statewide cultural, historical, and environmental significance, facing development pressures and impacts from growing urbanization.

AB 948 (Kalra, Chapter 356, Statutes of 2019) established the Coyote Valley as a resource of statewide significance subject to intense development pressure.

SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS

AMENDMENT 1.

Revise proposed Sec. 71470 as follows:

[...]

(c) The Santa Cruz Mountains are hereby designated as a ~~landscape-~~ resource of statewide significance that requires special protection. For purposes of this subdivision, "protection" has the same meaning as defined in Section 90100.

[...]

SUPPORT

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (co-sponsor)

Sempervirens Fund (co-sponsor)

Amah Mutsun Land Trust

County of Santa Clara

Green Foothills

Land Trust of Santa Cruz County

Santa Clara Valley Habitat Agency

Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority

OPPOSITION

None Received

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