

Date of Hearing: June 24, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 949 (Becker) – As Amended March 25, 2026

Policy Committee: Natural Resources Vote: 13 - 0

Urgency: No State Mandated Local Program: No Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill defines the geographic boundaries of the Santa Cruz Mountains and designates them a resource of statewide significance that requires special protection.

In addition, this bill, among other things, requires, to the extent resources are available, and when appropriate, the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA), and its boards, departments, and conservancies, to encourage collaborative stewardship approaches that support a variety of conservation, environmental, and public access goals; support collaboration with local tribes; and promote voluntary stewardship on public and private lands.

FISCAL EFFECT:

By designating the Santa Cruz Mountains a resource of statewide significance that requires special protection and requiring CNRA and its boards, departments, and conservancies, to the extent resources are available and when appropriate, to undertake various actions to protect, preserve, restore, and improve the region, this bill creates ongoing cost pressures – likely in excess of \$150,000 – on CNRA and the entities housed within the agency (General Fund, special fund, or bond funds).

The definition of “protection” in the Public Resources Code defines activities that are generally consistent with standard CNRA-funded project types (such as site monitoring, acquisition, development, restoration, preservation, and interpretation) and the bill does not explicitly create any new regulatory or enforcement responsibilities for CNRA. However, by granting the Santa Cruz Mountains a special designation and directing state agencies to, among other things, develop and maintain trails for public access and other recreational opportunities and provide technical assistance, conservation easements, incentive programs, and multibenefit projects in the region, the bill may make the Santa Cruz Mountains more competitive in grant processes and potentially lead CNRA to prioritize the region over other landscapes. As a result, CNRA would face cost pressure to provide funding for those other landscapes at funding levels that would have existed absent this bill.

While CNRA did not have an estimate for the number of projects the agency has funded in the Santa Cruz Mountains (as defined in the bill), the agency reports it has funded 146 projects (totaling approximately \$246 million in bond funds) in Santa Cruz County since 2019. In addition, the 2021 and 2022 climate budget packages provided approximately \$176 million for 172 projects (various fund sources) in the county.

COMMENTS:

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

The Santa Cruz Mountains are one of California’s most important natural landscapes – not just because of their ecological value, but because of their direct connection to millions of Californians...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, [CNRA] 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.

2) **Background. *Resources of Statewide Significance.*** SB 392 (Grayson), Chapter 754, Statutes of 2025, among other things, declared the East Bay Hills an area of statewide significance. According to the East Bay Regional Park District during the legislative consideration of SB 392, such a designation will help East Bay Hills in various ways, such as making it more competitive in grant applications. Other examples of areas the state has declared to be of statewide significance include the Santa Ana River and Lower American River.

Santa Cruz Mountains. According to the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee’s analysis of this bill, 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 species the federal or state government, or both, lists as endangered, 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 coastal redwoods filter water that flows into some of the most critical watersheds in the state. In addition, roughly five million people are within 20 miles of this mountain range, creating intense pressure on its wildlife, recreation, and other natural resources.

The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, and others write in support:

Coordinated management is essential for the Santa Cruz Mountains, which extend through San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Santa Cruz Counties...By formalizing this designation, SB 949 empowers the California Natural Resources Agency to prioritize the restoration of these natural ecosystems and the maintenance of public resources. Importantly, SB 949 does not impose new regulatory mandates. The bill aligns state priorities, promotes strategic investment, and strengthens collaboration among state, local, and nonprofit partners working in this iconic landscape.