

SENATE THIRD READING
SB 949 (Becker)
As Amended March 25, 2026
Majority vote

SUMMARY

Designates the Santa Cruz Mountains as a resource of statewide significance that requires special protection, as defined.

Major Provisions

- 1) Defines the "Santa Cruz Mountains" based on specified geographic boundaries.
- 2) Designates the Santa Cruz Mountains as a resource of statewide significance that requires special protection.
- 3) Requires, to the extent that resources are available, and when appropriate, the Natural Resources Agency (NRA), and its boards, departments, and conservancies, to encourage collaborative stewardship approaches that support specified protections, collaborations, improvements, and restoration efforts.
- 4) States that this bill shall not be construed as authorizing NRA to impose additional regulatory requirements on land use or working lands, including timber and agricultural lands, within the Santa Cruz Mountains.

COMMENTS

The Santa Cruz Mountains hold significant ecological value as a vital hotspot for biodiversity along California's central coast. The region supports more than 350 native plant species, including Douglas-fir and the rare sandhills habitats supports populations of Ponderosa pine and several endemic species of plants, including Santa Cruz cypress, silverleaf manzanita, and Santa Cruz wallflower. Spring wildflowers are also widespread throughout the range. Wildlife in the mountains includes the California red-legged frog and marbled murrelet. It also features endemic species, such as the federally listed San Francisco garter snake, Zayante band-winged grasshopper and the Santa Cruz black salamander. The region plays a critical role in sustaining ecological processes that support the broader landscape. Its forests and coast redwoods regulate local climate conditions through carbon capture, stabilize soils, and filter water that feeds into some of the most critical watersheds in the state. In addition, roughly 5 million people are within 20 miles of this important mountain range, creating intense pressure on its wildlife, recreation, and other natural resources.

The Santa Cruz Mountains contain a dense network of public parks, open-space preserves, conservation easements, watershed lands, and redwood reserves that qualify as 30×30 Conservation Areas under California's definition of lands that are durably protected and managed to sustain functional ecosystems. Pockets of the range are covered under the state's 30x30 framework totaling 28.6% of the Santa Cruz Mountain range's area.

According to the Author

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 Support

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, and others write that SB 949 empowers the NRA to prioritize the restoration of these natural ecosystems and the maintenance of public resources. With this designation, this bill requires, to the extent that resources are available, and when appropriate, NRA and its boards, departments, and conservancies, to encourage collaborative stewardship approaches that support protection, restoration, and preservation of the Santa Cruz Mountains' natural ecosystems, wildlife habitat, and healthy forest management; improvement of watershed management development and maintenance of trails for public access and other recreational opportunities; promotion of the long-term sustainability and conservation of working lands; collaboration with local tribes; and, promotion of voluntary stewardship on public and private lands in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Arguments in Opposition

None on file

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, this bill creates ongoing cost pressures – likely in excess of \$150,000 – on NRA and the entities housed within the agency (General Fund, special fund, or bond funds). NRA would face cost pressure to provide funding for certain landscapes at funding levels that would have existed absent this bill.

VOTES

SENATE FLOOR: 35-0-5

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

ABS, ABST OR NV: Alvarado-Gil, Dahle, Gonzalez, Grove, Niello

ASM NATURAL RESOURCES: 13-0-1

YES: Bryan, Ellis, Alanis, Connolly, Garcia, Haney, Hoover, Kalra, Macedo, Pellerin, Schultz, Wicks, Zbur

ABS, ABST OR NV: Muratsuchi

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0

YES: Wicks, Hoover, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Pacheco, Pellerin, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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