

Date of Hearing: April 14, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

AB 2627 (Hart) – As Introduced February 20, 2026

SUBJECT: California Rangeland, Grazing Land, and Grassland Protection Program

SUMMARY: Appropriates \$90 million from funds allocated to the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) in Proposition 4 to the California Rangeland, Grazing Land, and Grassland Protection Program (Rangeland Program) administered by WCB. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Appropriates \$90 million from funds allocated to WCB in Proposition 4 for grants to acquire conservation easements on privately owned property, to be administered by WCB under its Rangeland Program.
- 2) Provides that grants must be to an “eligible entity” under the Rangeland Program and may cover the following costs:
 - a) Up to 100% of a property appraisal; and
 - b) Up to \$75,000 for costs incurred by the grantee to record a conservation easement.
- 3) Requires a grantee receiving funds pursuant to this bill to record a conservation easement no later than June 30, 2029.
- 4) Defines “eligible entity” for purposes of receiving funding from the Rangeland Program as an entity that has received accreditation from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission (LTA Commission), demonstrates capacity to acquire a conservation easement within 18 months of a grant award, and demonstrates the financial capacity to ensure the long-term stewardship of protected lands.
- 5) Defines “tribe” for purposes of the Rangeland Program as a federally recognized Native American tribe or a nonfederally recognized Native American tribe listed on the California Tribal Consultation list maintained by the Native American Heritage Commission.
- 6) Makes technical and conforming changes.
- 7) Makes legislative findings and declarations regarding the importance of rangelands to California and their role in achieving multiple public benefits.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes WCB, under the Wildlife Conservation Law of 1947, in the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) [Fish and Game Code (FGC) § 1320].
- 2) Establishes the Rangeland Program to protect California’s rangeland, grazing land, and grasslands through the use of conservation easements [Public Resources Code (PRC) § 10331].

- 3) Authorizes, under the Rangeland Program, funds to be expended by WCB for the acquisition of conservation easements over qualified property and authorizes WCB to make grants of funds to a state agency, local public agency, or nonprofit organization for the acquisition of conservation easements over qualified property (PRC § 10334).
- 4) Requires WCB to authorize the acquisition of real property, rights in real property, water, or water rights as may be necessary to carry out the purposes of this chapter (FGC § 1348).
- 5) Allocates, pursuant to Proposition 4, \$870 million to WCB for grant programs to protect and enhance fish and wildlife resources and habitat and achieve the state's biodiversity, public access, and conservation goals. Allocated funds are not available to WCB until appropriated by the Legislature (PRC § 93010). Sub-allocates \$202 million of the \$870 million for WCB as follows:
 - a) Allocates \$100 million for projects to improve habitat connectivity and establish wildlife crossings and corridors (PRC § 93030).
 - b) Allocates \$80 million to establish the San Andreas Corridor Program for the protection and restoration of wildlife corridors along the inner Coast Ranges and the San Andreas Fault (PRC § 93030).
 - c) Allocates \$22 million to projects for climate change adaptation improvements to protect, conserve, and restore the health and resilience of the southern Ballona Creek Watershed (PRC § 93050).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** The author argues this bill is necessary to help achieve the state's 30x30 goals and will provide numerous other public benefits: "[Conservation] easements protect working rangelands, while maintaining their economic viability and agricultural production. By incentivizing voluntary conservation on rangelands, the State can advance its climate goals, while delivering numerous public benefits. [This bill] will help expand conservation on working lands, support wildfire fuel reduction, enhance groundwater recharge, protect wildlife habitat, and preserve open space."
- 2) **Background.** Rangelands comprise land on which vegetation is predominantly grasses, forbs, or shrubs and in some cases includes scattered trees (e.g., oak woodlands); rangelands include grassland, savannah, shrublands, meadows, many deserts, and montane areas and cover nearly 2/3's of California's land area. This bill addresses a subset of rangelands, primarily annual grasslands and oak woodlands, where livestock grazing or ranching occurs. An estimated 22 million acres (roughly 43%) of this "rangeland" is privately-owned and would be eligible to receive funding appropriated by this bill. Along with economic benefits from ranching, rangelands provide a number of ecological and social benefits as well, including wildlife habitat, habitat connectivity, carbon sequestration, soil protection, water quality improvement, groundwater recharge, and cultural preservation.

Rangelands have been under threat due to conversion to other uses for some time. Analysis tracking the conversion of rangeland in the Central Valley and foothills, Central Coast range,

Bay Area, and Mojave Desert found that over 480,000 acres of rangelands had been converted primarily due to urban development and agricultural intensification (i.e., conversion to orchards or vineyards) between 1984 and 2008.¹ More recent analysis suggests that grassland habitats on rangelands continue to be threatened by land use conversion and climate change and that as much as an additional 37% of this land cover could be lost by 2100.²

WCB. WCB was created by the Wildlife Conservation Law of 1947 to administer a capital outlay program for wildlife conservation and related public recreation. WCB has a seven-member board that consists of the President of the Fish and Game Commission, the Director of DFW, the Director of the Department of Finance, and four public members (two appointed by the Legislature and two appointed by the Governor). The primary responsibilities of WCB are to select, authorize and allocate funds for the purchase of land and waters suitable for recreation purposes and the preservation, protection and restoration of wildlife habitat. WCB approves and funds projects that set aside lands within the state for such purposes. This bill would embed the protection of wildlife corridors in WCB's core mission.

Rangeland Program. Established by the Legislature in 2002 [SB 984 (Costa)], the Rangeland Program is one of 17 programs that WCB administers. The purpose of the Rangeland Program is to protect California's rangeland, grazing land and grassland through the use of conservation easements in order to protect California's rangelands from conversion to non-agricultural uses. The Rangeland Program is also designed to protect the long-term sustainability of livestock grazing and ensure rangelands continue to provide ecosystem benefits to the state.

Conservation easements. A conservation easement is a voluntary, legal agreement that permanently limits the uses of land in order to protect its conservation values. According to the California Council of Land Trusts: "typically, a conservation easement limits subdivision and non-agricultural, commercial uses. Most conservation easements allow continued grazing, fencing, irrigation, hunting or other traditional land uses that are consistent with the conservation values of the property. Conservation easements do not require public access. As a legal agreement, a conservation easement is attached to the property's deed and recorded with the county. Easements are granted in perpetuity, meaning that all future owners of the land must respect the uses set forth in the document. The land trust or other easement holder is responsible for making sure the terms of the easement are followed."

Proposition 4. Voters approved Proposition 4 at the November 5, 2024, statewide general election, thereby authorizing the state to issue \$10 billion in general obligation bonds to finance projects for safe drinking water, drought, flood, and water resilience, wildfire and forest resilience, coastal resilience, extreme heat mitigation, biodiversity and nature-based climate solutions, climate-smart, sustainable, and resilient farms, ranches, and working lands, park creation and outdoor access, and clean air programs.

¹ Cameron DR, Marty J, Holland RF (2014) "Whither the Rangeland?: Protection and Conversion in California's Rangeland Ecosystems." *PLoS ONE* 9(8): e103468. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0103468

² Byrd, K.B., Flint, L.E., Alvarez, P. *et al.* "Integrated climate and land use change scenarios for California rangeland ecosystem services: wildlife habitat, soil carbon, and water supply." *Landscape Ecol* 30, 729–750 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10980-015-0159-7>

Proposition allocates \$870 million to WCB for grant programs to protect and enhance fish and wildlife resources and habitat and achieve the state's biodiversity, public access, and conservation goals. This bill earmarks \$90 million of the Proposition 4 funds allocated to WCB for the Rangeland Program. For the current fiscal year, the Legislature appropriated \$256 million to WCB generally to award grants under its existing programs, \$21 million to WCB for wildlife crossings and corridors projects, and \$20 million to the Southern Ballona Creek watershed.

30x30. In October 2020, Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-82-20 which establishes a state goal of conserving 30% of California's lands and coastal waters by 2030, the "30x30" goal. 30x30 is intended to help accelerate conservation of our lands and coastal waters through voluntary, collaborative, action with federal and local governments, California Native American tribes, and private landowners. California's 30x30 commitment is part of a similar global push for conservation which includes the United States. According to the Natural Resources Agency's latest progress report on achieving the 30x30 goals ("Pathways to 30x30," July 2025), 26.1% of California's lands and 21.9% of its coastal waters are under long-term conservation and care.

LTA Commission. The LTA Commission was established as an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance in 2006. The mission of the LTA Commission is to inspire excellence, promote public trust, and ensure permanence in the conservation of open lands by recognizing land trust organizations that meet rigorous quality standards and that strive for continuous improvement. The accreditation seal is a mark of distinction in land conservation. It is awarded to eligible land trusts meeting the highest national standards for excellence and conservation permanence. To be eligible, a land trust must be a U.S.-based 501(c)(3) tax-exempt public charity or quasi-governmental organization, have been incorporated for at least two years, have completed at least two direct conservation fee or conservation easement acquisition projects, and comply with accepted land trust standards and practices.

- 3) **Arguments in support.** The California Cattlemen's Association (CCA) supports this bill and points out the many public benefits that rangelands provide the state, including water supply protection, wildfire fuel reduction, wildlife habitat, carbon storage, food production, and open space. CCA asserts this bill will help the state achieve its 30x30 goals and that easements are one of the most cost-effective conservation tools: "Conservation easements are more affordable than fee acquisition (often costing about one-third as much) and they also keep properties on the tax rolls while being maintained by private landowners, minimizing public stewardship burdens."
- 4) **Dual referral.** This bill has also been referred to the Assembly Natural Resources Committee where it is scheduled for hearing on Monday, April 13, 2026.
- 5) **Related legislation.** AB 1311 (Hart) of 2025 would have appropriated \$400 million from Proposition 4 to WCB for grants to eligible entities to acquire conservation easements on private rangeland. AB 1311 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 556 (Hurtado) of 2025 would have allocated \$21.5 million from Proposition 4 to WCB for multiple benefit floodplain restoration projects in Kern, Kings, and Tulare Counties upon

appropriation by the Legislature. SB 556 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 867 (Allen), Chapter 83, Statutes of 2024, placed Proposition 4 on the November 2024 ballot, a \$10 billion climate bond. Voters approved Proposition 4 by a margin of 59.8% to 40.2%.

SB 977 (Laird) of 2022 would have created the California Conservation Ranching Incentive Program at WCB to restore and enhance the ecological health of private rangelands. SB 977 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 322 (Laird) of 2021 would have created the California Conservation Ranching Incentive Program at the Department of Conservation to enroll private landowners or lessees of productive rangelands, grazing lands, or grasslands in three-year contracts to restore, enhance, and protect the land's grassland habitat character. SB 322 was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 2550 (Eduardo Garcia) of 2020 was substantially similar to SB 322. AB 2550 was never set for a hearing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

AB 3030 (Kalra) of 2019 would have established the 30x30 goal in statute to protect land, water, and ocean areas representing 30% of the state's land areas and coastal waters by 2030. AB 3030 was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

SB 984 (Costa), Chapter 984, Statutes of 2002, establishes the Rangeland Program at WCB.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

American Farmland Trust
California Cattlemen's Association
California Farm Bureau Federation
California Rangeland Trust
Grassroots Carbon

Opposition

None on file

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