

Date of Hearing: April 18, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, Chair

AB 720 (Addis) – As Amended March 16, 2023

**SUBJECT:** California Rangeland, Grazing Land, and Grassland Protection Program: grants for local programs

**SUMMARY:** Expands the California Rangeland, Grazing Land, and Grassland Protection Program (Program) administered by the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) to include grants to enhance or restore California's private rangelands. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Expands the Program by requiring WCB to administer a local grant program to award grants to eligible entities, as defined, to administer, plan, and implement local programs to enhance or restore California's private rangelands, as specified.
- 2) Authorizes WCB to develop Program grant guidelines.
- 3) Requires WCB and any Program grantee, in evaluating proposed projects, to evaluate the ability of the project to meet the purposes of the Program and to consider the following selection criteria:
  - a) The potential for restoring, enhancing, and protecting biodiversity on the subject property;
  - b) Threats to the subject property, including risk of destruction, drastic modification, or significant curtailment of habitat values;
  - c) The proximity of the subject property to a state wildlife area, national wildlife refuge, or land enrolled in a conservation easement or wildlife conservation program;
  - d) Additional environmental benefits to natural resource values such as climate resilience, stewardship of healthy soils, wildfire resilience, protection of wetland and riparian areas, conservation of special status species, and groundwater recharge;
  - e) The potential to increase the diversity and abundance of native species and decrease the abundance of invasive species;
  - f) The ability of the Program grantee to ensure that the management plan and local program will be completed and managed by individuals with adequate expertise in rangeland management to meet the purposes of this division; and
  - g) The project is managed by a socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher as defined in Section 512 of the Food and Agricultural Code or a beginning farmer or rancher as defined in Section 3430.602 of Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations.
- 4) Permits WCB to authorize a Program grantee to use not more than 30% of the grant moneys for all of the following purposes:

- a) To assist WCB in the design, outreach, implementation, and monitoring of the Program;
  - b) To assist landowners or lessees of private rangelands in the design and implementation of projects;
  - c) To provide direct technical assistance to landowners or lessees of private rangelands to access grant moneys;
  - d) To assist landowners or lessees of private rangelands in the preparation of management plans; and
  - e) To contract for technical assistance providers to assist landowners or lessees to prepare, implement, and monitor management plans.
- 5) Requires each Program grantee, on or before a date determined by WCB in the grant agreement, to submit an annual report describing and evaluating the implementation of the project and the use of the grant moneys for the project during the previous year, as specified.
  - 6) Defines “eligible entity” to mean a regional conservancy, resource conservation district, nonprofit organization, local governmental agency, state agency, federal agency, California Native American tribe, or other entity as identified by WCB.
  - 7) Defines “local program” to mean a local program implemented by a Program grantee within a defined area of consistent or connected ecosystem values to meet the purposes of the program.
  - 8) Defines “project” to mean an agreement between a Program grantee and a landowner or lessee of private rangelands to award grant moneys to the landowner or lessee to implement conservation ranching practices on the subject property that meet the purposes of the Program.
  - 9) Defines several additional terms for the purposes of the new Program, including “certified rangeland manager” and “management plan,” among others.
  - 10) Recasts certain provisions of the Rangeland, Grazing Land, and Grassland Protection Act and makes conforming changes.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Establishes the WCB [Fish and Game Code (FGC) § 1320].
- 2) Authorizes WCB to acquire property on behalf of DFW and award grants for fish and wildlife habitat conservation, restoration, and for development of compatible public access facilities (FGC § 1345).
- 3) Requires WCB to carry out the program to protect California’s rangeland, grazing land, and grasslands through the use of conservation easements [Public Resources Code (PRC) § 10330 *et seq.*].

- 4) Provides grants for the acquisition of conservation easements to protect, restore, or enhance rangeland, grazing land, or grassland, and sustain the character of specified property (PRC § 10337).

**FISCAL EFFECT:** Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

**COMMENTS:**

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** This bill expands the existing Program to allow for grants for conservation ranching practices. According to the author, “[this bill] will support sustainable grazing in California. With 61 million acres of rangeland across California, it’s crucial that we take these important steps to protect our agricultural biodiversity while bolstering California’s ranching economy for years to come.”
- 2) **Background.** Rangelands comprise land on which vegetation is predominantly grasses, forbs (i.e., a kind of flowering plant), or shrubs and in some cases includes scattered trees (e.g., oak woodlands); rangelands include grasslands, savannah, shrublands, meadows, many deserts, and montane areas and cover nearly two-thirds of California’s land area (61 million acres). Along with economic benefits from ranching, rangelands provide a number of ecological and social benefits such as wildlife habitat, habitat connectivity, carbon sequestration, soil protection, water quality improvement, groundwater recharge, and cultural preservation.

A recent study identifies California grasslands as more reliable and resilient carbon sinks than forests.<sup>1</sup> However, this California land use is under threat with an average of 20,000 acres a year being lost to development or crop conversion. An 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Invasive species, aquifer depletion, and poor grazing practices also degrade large portions of rangelands.

Grazing, when actively managed to promote biodiversity, can support grassland bird conservation and provide other benefits. In climates like California’s, where grasslands have suffered substantial losses to other uses and invasive species, research suggests that actively managed grazing for biodiversity can help to manage exotic and invasive species and create diversity within the vegetative structure, benefitting native grasses, grassland birds, and other

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<sup>1</sup> Dass, P., et al. (2018). Grasslands may be more reliable carbon sinks than forests in California. *Environ. Res. Lett.* 13 074027. Accessed April 10, 2023, at <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/aacb39/meta>.

<sup>2</sup> Cameron, D.R., Marty, J., Holland, R.F. (2014). Whither the Rangeland?: Protection and Conversion in California’s Rangeland Ecosystems. *PLoS ONE* 9(8): e103468. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0103468. Accessed April 13, 2023, at <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0103468>.

<sup>3</sup> Byrd, K.B., Flint, L.E., Alvarez, P. et al. (2015). Integrated climate and land use change scenarios for California rangeland ecosystem services: wildlife habitat, soil carbon, and water supply. *Landscape Ecol* 30, 729–750. Accessed April 13, 2023, at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10980-015-0159-7>.

species.<sup>4,5</sup> Managed grazing can also reduce overgrown invasive grasses that intensify wildfires.<sup>6</sup> Grazing is spatially and temporally complex given California’s variable climate and the different types of ecosystems that constitute “rangeland.”

Grazing intensity and frequency, as well as livestock selectivity, can be manipulated using the four principles of range management. These four principles are the kind and class, number, spatial distribution, and temporal distribution of livestock. Changes in these four variables can support specific management goals, such as enhancing vegetative productivity, controlling invasive species, reducing fire hazard, improving habitat, and sequestering carbon dioxide. Grazing systems are commonly used to prevent selectivity, or the tendency of livestock to repeatedly consume particular plant species or communities, which can cause soil erosion or compaction.

This bill deals with a subset of rangelands, primarily annual grasslands and oak woodlands, where livestock grazing or ranching occurs. An estimated 22 million acres of this subset of rangeland is privately-owned and could be eligible to receive incentives through the expanded program proposed by this bill.

*Conservation Ranching Initiative.* The National Audubon Society has developed the Conservation Ranching Initiative, which is a market-based conservation approach that offers incentives for good grassland stewardship through a certification label on beef products. Participating producers agree to adopt initiative standards and implement a Habitat Management Plan developed in cooperation with Audubon or an agency partner. That plan outlines steps to build better habitat for local birds while being responsive to practical farm management considerations and the economic needs of the operation. These plans include an implementation schedule and set targets for annual improvement. The initiative connects producers to agency cost share and incentive programs to help defray costs.

*State role in private land conservation and enhancement.* The state has a number of programs administered by various state agencies to protect and enhance different types of lands and habitats on private lands; WCB itself has more than a dozen existing programs to preserve specific types of habitat and species (e.g., oak woodlands and monarch butterflies) or special resources (e.g., Lower American River). Many existing programs have relied on bond funding and focus on activities that have a longer term benefit such as land acquisition, conservation easements, or large-scale restoration.

In contrast, the program proposed by this bill will fund planning and ongoing practices (i.e., conservation ranching practices) that will enhance ecological benefits on rangelands. This is not to say that this approach is unprecedented amongst state conservation programs. A number of DFW programs provide funding for one to ten year contracts with land owners or

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<sup>4</sup> Allison, C.D. and Bender, L.C. (2017). Grazing and Biodiversity. Guide CR-686, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, New Mexico State University. Accessed April 10, 2023, at [https://pubs.nmsu.edu/\\_circulars/CR686/index.html](https://pubs.nmsu.edu/_circulars/CR686/index.html).

<sup>5</sup> Barry, S., et al. (2015). The Benefits of Livestock Grazing California’s Annual Grasslands. UC ANR Publication 8517. Accessed April 10, 2023, at <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8517.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Porensky, L.M., et al. (2018). Combining active restoration and targeted grazing to establish native plants and reduce fuel loads in invaded ecosystems. *Ecol Evol.*;8(24):12533-12546. doi: 10.1002/ece3.4642. Accessed April 10, 2023, at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6309004/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6309004/).

lessees to implement habitat management practices to benefit wildlife. Some examples include the California Waterfowl Habitat Program, the California Winter Rice Habitat Incentive Program, and the Nesting Bird Habitat Incentive Program. Likewise, the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) administers the Healthy Soils program that offers incentives to landowners to adopt practices that provide environmental and climate benefits.

- 3) **Arguments in support.** Several organizations write in support, with the California Cattlemen’s Association stating that “to address the decline in grassland bird species and other wildlife, keep ranchers ranching, and meet California’s climate goals, the state must work to slow conversion of rangeland while fostering partnerships with ranchers to steward those lands for the multiple benefits they bestow upon people and wildlife.”
- 4) **Related legislation.** SB 977 (Laird) of 2022 would have established the California Conservation Ranching Incentive Program at WCB to restore and enhance the ecological health of private rangelands. SB 977 died in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 322 (Laird) of 2021 was substantially similar to SB 977 of 2022. SB 322 died in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 2550 (Eduardo Garcia) of 2020 would have created the California Conservation Ranching Incentive Program at the Department of Conservation. AB 2550 was never set for a hearing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and shortened legislative session.

SB 253 (Dodd) of 2019 and SB 1028 (Dodd) of 2020 would have established the California Environmental Farming Incentive Program at CDFA. The 2019 version died in the Assembly Appropriations Committee. The 2020 version was not heard due to the COVID-19 pandemic and shortened legislative session.

SB 984 (Costa), Chapter 984, Statutes of 2002, established the California Rangeland, Grazing Land, and Grassland Protection Program.

## **REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

### **Support**

Audubon California  
 California Cattlemen's Association  
 California Climate & Agricultural Network (CALCAN)  
 California Environmental Voters  
 Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District  
 The Nature Conservancy

### **Opposition**

None on file

**Analysis Prepared by:** Keith Cialino / W., P., & W. / (916) 319-2096