

April 15, 2026

### Legislative Affairs Director's Note



One of the paramount reasons I enjoyed the Capitol when I began working in water policy was the fast-paced and action-packed nature of the work. Policy in California's Capitol is lively and ever-changing, though a few overarching themes each year tend to pull the focus of every conversation taking place: the upcoming Gubernatorial Election, changes in the Federal Administration and the role of AI in our society have all been centered at the forefront of politics in the weeks leading up to the 2026 legislative session.

The most pressing and all-consuming issue of them all is arguably the state's [affordability crisis](#). The state is facing a structural deficit in its budget over the next several years, and its usual willingness to invest in new programs is much more reserved than recent years. Additionally, housing reform, streamlining measures and rate structures designed to tackle affordability have nearly overwhelmed every policy committee staffer in the Capitol. Traveling through the same policy committees are, of course, many of our priorities here at Northern California Water. In light of the current political climate, we carefully crafted our legislative portfolio this year to meet our toughest challenges with thoughtful solutions, to collaborate across multiple sectors of policy, and to capitalize on our opportunities as they come.

At Northern California Water, we are well equipped for these scenarios in the state Legislature, and we are poised to further our vision of a bright and sustainable future for the Sacramento Valley. After the creation of long-term water supply goals, such as the target of [9 maf of additional storage set by SB 72](#) (Caballero, 2025), the water policy space is exploring sustainable groundwater management as a tool to support and reach these targets.

The Sacramento Valley is several steps ahead: for years, our water managers, farmers and engineers have proved that groundwater recharge is among the most affordable sources of natural storage infrastructure in the state. Recharge is a crucial tool the state can use to *meet its water supply needs, make impactful environmental investments and take advantage* of times when water is abundant across the landscapes. Our partnerships and projects, and most recently our co-sponsored bill AB 2026 (Aguilar-Curry), have brought our Valley's innovation to the forefront of the state's efforts to secure our water supply in the face of climate extremes.

Where the state legislature grapples with complex issues, Northern California Water brings *solutions* to the table. We *collaborate* with the broader water community to invest in 21st century water management and address challenges with invasive mussels; we *build coalitions* that advocate for funding to reactivate our historic floodplains; we *educate* new staffers and legislators on the science and technical work we invest in; and we *safeguard* our water resources for our future generations.

As the 2026 legislative session is underway, I feel confident that the Sacramento Valley is rising to meet its challenges and will provide the state with workable and thoughtful solutions. I look forward to working with our partners and with the region this year to move our collective vision forward and create a vibrant future for the Valley we all call home.



Kam Bezdek  
Legislative Affairs Director

## **GROUNDWATER RECHARGE**

The NCWA Board of Directors has made recharging our groundwater aquifers a priority for 2026. (See [Roger Cornwell's Chair Remarks](#) at our annual meeting in March and the [Groundwater: Pathway for the Future](#))

In February, NCWA Board Vice Chair Jim Mayer and RWA Board President Michael Saunders co-authored [Recharge the Valley](#), a guest commentary in Maven's Notebook highlighting the importance of increasing our groundwater recharge capabilities in the Sacramento Valley:

*"California doesn't need to reinvent recharge—we just need to implement the intent of SGMA and remove friction. We appreciate the leadership of Assembly Member Aguiar-Curry in introducing legislation, [AB 2026](#), to improve policy for groundwater recharge and to remove friction where needed." —Recharge the Valley, February 2026*

Our efforts include a focused partnership with the Department of Water Resources and local water agencies and groundwater sustainability agencies (the SacRecharge or Sacramento Valley Flood Diversion and Enhancement Working Group) to improve groundwater recharge opportunities throughout the region; technical work by MBK Engineers to better understand future opportunities; and legislation described below we believe is necessary to improve the process for additional groundwater recharge while protecting water rights, the state and federal projects, and the environment.

## **Outcomes Review Process**

This year, Speaker Robert Rivas of the California State Assembly announced that the Assembly Committees would be utilizing the ["Outcomes Review"](#) tool, where members could hold informational hearings designed to review the impacts and goals of prior legislation to assess their effectiveness. In his press release for the Review, the Speaker conveyed that "passing laws is only the first step. The real test is ensuring they work. Gone are the days when laws can be signed and forgotten. The Outcomes Review tool empowers Assembly members to evaluate real-world outcomes, engage directly with residents, and refine our solutions for greater impact. It's a forward-looking approach to oversight that every 21st century Legislature should adopt."

Of particular note to the Sacramento Valley, [AB 658 \(Arambula, 2019\)](#) was reviewed in March by the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife. AB 658 established the 5-year temporary permit for groundwater recharge, with the intent on creating more avenues with which to apply for and receive permits for recharge and to scale up recharge efforts across California. NCWA engaged early with the Committee to connect them to our members and help inform the committee on our collective experiences with the State Water Board and the permitting process for recharge.

During their testimony in the hearing, the State Water Board stated that “targeted adjustments” were necessary to improve upon the recharge permitting process and indicated a willingness to work with the Legislature and stakeholders on increasing recharge capabilities across California. NCWA is looking forward to working with the State Water Board and the Administration to increase our ability to permit and recharge groundwater in the Sacramento Valley (see the AB 2026 discussion below).

### **AB 2026 (Aguiar-Curry): Incentivizing Groundwater Recharge for Water Supply Sustainability**

NCWA is pleased to sponsor [AB 2026](#) in partnership with the Regional Water Authority (RWA). Authored by Assemblymember Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, this bill would increase groundwater storage and remove impediments to recharge, and builds upon technical recommendations made by the Sacramento Valley Flood Diversion and Recharge Enhancement Working Group (SV-FDRE).

Kam Bezdek (NCWA) and Ryan Ojakian (RWA) co-authored a blog as part of Groundwater Awareness Week in March. The blog, [AB 2026: Creating More Groundwater Recharge Opportunities for the Sacramento Valley](#), outlined the legislative process and our shared vision for better recharge processes for our managers in the North State.

As the blog and guest commentary both describe, AB 2026 would accomplish the following actions:

- Refine SB 122 (2023) on flood diversions by enhancing public safety and clarifying certain provisions to encourage groundwater recharge.
- Expand water available under permits by better utilizing an alternative to the current 90/20 criteria in a manner that protects water rights and communities, state and federal water projects, and environmental needs.
- Build on SB 1390 (Caballero, 2024), using the language from the latest version of that measure, and make it clear when water can be diverted. This component of the proposal welcomes input and collaboration from parties along the San Joaquin River, and will solicit input from the San Joaquin River Collaborative Action Program (CAP).
- Define recharged water as a beneficial use.
- Build upon the provisions in the various Governor’s Executive Orders with CEQA streamlining provisions developed by the Administration, with specific provisions ensuring tribal consultation.
- Address affordability by limiting fees for the full permit, the 180-day permit and the 5-year permit.

This bill was heard on April 14 in the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife and passed. The bill now be heard in the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources. NCWA, RWA and

Assemblywoman Aguiar-Curry are working hard with many interested parties to further this legislation and enable the Sacramento Valley to take advantage of its recharge opportunities. If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact Kam Bezdek ([kbezdek@norcalwater.org](mailto:kbezdek@norcalwater.org)) and Ryan Ojakian ([rojakian@rwah2o.org](mailto:rojakian@rwah2o.org)).

## HEALTHY RIVERS AND LANDSCAPES

The adoption of the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes (HRL) Program as a pathway in the Bay Delta Plan Update is NCWA's top priority for this year. State, federal and local agencies are working in tandem with the Newsom Administration to adopt the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program by October 2026. NCWA is proud to be involved in several legislative initiatives to support the successful adoption of Healthy Rivers and Landscapes and provide the program with critical funding for its adoption.

The Legislative Analysis Office (LAO) recently published a report on Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program. NCWA met with the LAO prior to its release and provided information and our unique perspective to the authors of the report. [The released report](#) details the history of the program, the collaboration between diverse parties that took place and the immense benefits to ecosystem that this program provides as the primary alternative to unimpaired flows. The report also recommends that the Legislature maintains regular oversight to ensure the implementation of HRL.

In alignment with the recommendations of the LAO Report, NCWA and its partners are seeking a Legislative Support Letter through Assembly Majority Leader Cecilia Aguiar-Curry (D-04) and Senate Majority Leader Angelique Ashby (D-08), building on a similar letter in 2024, to secure bipartisan Legislative support for the adoption of Healthy Rivers and Landscapes. The letter would also request an update to the Legislature in August of 2026 on the progress of the Bay Delta Plan Update.

NCWA looks forward to the adoption of the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program. For more information on Healthy Rivers and Landscapes, or the adoption of the Bay Delta Plan Update, please visit [healthyiverslandscapes.org](http://healthyiverslandscapes.org).

## PRIORITY LEGISLATION

### Funding/Proposition 4

[AB 35 \(Alvarez\)](#). – This bill would provide the necessary APA exemption to Proposition 4 funding for faster implementation of Proposition 4 funding. Proposition 4 offers important funding for groundwater sustainability and recharge, headwaters management, water conveyance, fish and wildlife programs, and stream gauges. This bill passed through the Assembly as an urgency measure and is currently awaiting assignment in the Senate, and NCWA, as part of a broad coalition of organizations across many water and environmental interests, is pleased to support this measure.

### Water Quality

[AB 2447 \(Bauer-Kahan\)](#). – Would require the State Water Resources Control Board to require the regional boards to update the Irrigated Lands Program to reduce nitrogen waste discharges from

irrigated agricultural areas. NCWA has joined a broad coalition of agricultural and water quality interests in opposition and will be lobbying against this measure in upcoming hearings in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations.

[SB 601 \(Allen\)](#) – Would require the State Water Board to adopt water quality control plans for nexus waters. This would be disruptive to existing processes and updates for many water quality control plans across the State and within our region. NCWA remains opposed to this measure, which remains in the Senate Committee on Appropriations.

## **Water Rights**

We firmly believe that California's existing water rights structure and system are working in the Sacramento Valley to serve water for multiple benefits, including cities and rural communities, farms and ranches, fish and wildlife, recreation, and hydropower. The water rights system also allows water to spread out and slow down on the landscape, which is dependent upon a modern water system and essential to a functional Sacramento Valley where water serves multiple benefits.

NCWA is working hard to safeguard our water rights and resources in the State Legislature and actively educates staff, legislators and other organizations on water management in the Sacramento Valley. NCWA is also remaining closely engaged with stakeholders for the following bills, which propose changes to the existing water rights system.

[AB 1146 \(Papan\)](#) – This measure would prohibit the release of stored water from a reservoir owned and operated by the United States if the release is done under "false pretenses," which the bill defines as "a release of water from a reservoir owned and operated by the United States in a manner that is knowingly, designedly, and intentionally under any false or fraudulent representation" of its intended use of the water. Additionally, the bill would authorize the State Water Board or the Attorney General, as provided, to issue injunctive relief for a violation of the prohibition described. NCWA maintains a watch position on this legislation, and this two-year bill sits in the Senate Committee on Appropriations.

[AB 2218 \(Kalra\)](#) – This bill would establish a new policy of the state "to acknowledge and correct the inequities caused by state-sanctioned acts of termination, removal, and assimilation inflicted upon all California Native American tribes through compensation, legal recognition of rights, or replacement of benefits lost." The bill would require state agencies, including the Department of Water Resources and the State Water Board, to consider and incorporate this policy when "revising, adopting, or establishing rights, policies, regulations, permits, or grant criteria to address identified inequities." NCWA currently maintains a watch position on this measure.

[AB 2260 \(Connolly\)](#) – AB 2260 would extend the ability to obtain a right to appropriate water for a small restoration use. NCWA is pleased to support this measure, which will soon arrive in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations.

[AB 2630 \(Bennett\)](#) – This measure would require that further regulations, specifically for water diversions, be adopted by the State Water Board pursuant to these provisions be adopted as

emergency regulations and remain in effect until revised by the State Water Board and would exempt them from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). NCWA is joining a coalition of organizations in opposition, and this bill will next be heard in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee, its second policy committee in the Assembly.

## **Golden Mussels**

State legislators have faced increasing pressures from constituents to create solutions to a growing problem for water managers: invasive golden mussels. NCWA is supportive of these efforts and looks forward to collaborating with the water community on bills that propose smart management solutions designed to help contain and manage golden mussels in our reservoirs, conveyance systems and rivers.

[AB 1772 \(Papan\)](#) – AB 1772 would require the Department of Fish and Wildlife to require water supply system operators to update their plans to address all invasive mussel species present in the operator’s water system as of January 1, 2026, and would require a plan to minimize or eliminate the spread of invasive mussels, among other provisions.

[AB 2032 \(Ransom\)](#) – This bill would exempt a public or private agency that operates a water supply system, that seeks to control the spread of golden mussels in that water supply system, from the requirement to obtain a restricted species permit, among other provisions.

[AB 1894 \(B. Rubio\)](#) – This bill would establish that the state has exclusive authority to regulate invasive mussels. Additionally, AB 1894 would prohibit a city, county, district, or other local agency from adopting any rule or policy pertaining to invasive mussels without authorization through state law.

## **Groundwater**

Groundwater has emerged as an important topic for many legislators statewide in 2026. In addition to AB 2026 and the Outcomes Review Process, conversations surrounding another piece of legislation concerning groundwater have continued from last year’s discussions.

[AB 1413 \(Papan\)](#) – This bill would require a groundwater sustainability agency to, at least once every 7 years, review, and potentially update its sustainable yield and to solicit public input within that process. While this bill continues to be highly divisive among the broader water and agriculture community, NCWA maintains a watch position and is trying to be helpful to diverse parties on these important issues. The bill underwent significant amendment last year in the Senate Appropriations Committee and was made a two-year measure by the Author.

## **Wildlife and Habitat**

[AB 1169 \(J. Gonzalez\)](#) – This measure would require (not simply authorize) the Department of Fish and Wildlife to provide grants to non-profit conservation organizations as part of the Shared Habitat Alliance for Recreational Enhancement (SHARE) Program. This program encourages private landowners to voluntarily make their land available to the public for wildlife-dependent

recreational activities. Additionally, the bill would increase the cap on compensation offered to private landowners in the SHARE program to \$52 per acre. NCWA is pleased to support this 2-year legislation, which is currently in the Senate Committee on Appropriations.

[AB 1987 \(Aguiar-Curry\)](#) – This measure would ensure that hunter-generated user fee revenues from Waterfowl Management Areas are used solely for the operations and maintenance (O&M) for those lands by establishing a dedicated account and restricting the use of the revenues. According to the author, AB 1987 “would additionally ensure that any agricultural lease revenues (approximately \$2.8 million annually) from the Wildlife Areas, such as the growing of rice or other wildlife-friendly cereal grains, are also dedicated back for use on those lands.” NCWA is pleased to join a coalition in support of the measure, which passed out of the committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife on March 24<sup>th</sup> and is currently in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations.

[AB 2216 \(Aguiar-Curry\)](#) – This bill would expand the area covered by the Delta Conservancy to include portions of Yolo, Sacramento, Solano, and San Joaquin Counties that are outside of the Delta. Additionally, AB 2216 would rename the conservancy the Valley and Delta Conservancy, rename the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy Fund the Valley and Delta Conservancy Fund, and add 2 additional liaison advisers who are designees of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and the San Joaquin River Conservancy, respectively. NCWA is maintaining a watch position on this measure.

[AB 2045 \(Connolly\)](#) – This measure would extend the Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Act (HREA) indefinitely. This Act streamlines the approval of voluntary local restoration projects by the Department of Fish and Wildlife. NCWA is pleased to support this measure, along with partners collaborating on floodplain restoration projects in the Sacramento Valley. This bill will arrive in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations in the coming weeks.