

Date of Hearing: March 23, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Isaac G. Bryan, Chair

AB 1938 (Irwin) – As Introduced February 13, 2026

SUBJECT: Coastal recreation: designated state surfing reserves

SUMMARY: Authorizes the designation of surfing reserves.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Requires, pursuant to the California Coastal Act of 1976, oceanfront land suitable for recreational use to be protected for recreational use and development unless present and foreseeable future demand for public or commercial recreational activities that could be accommodated on the property is already adequately provided for in the area. (Public Resources Code (PRC) 30221)
- 2) Establishes, pursuant to the California Ocean Protection Act, the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) and provides that the purpose of the Act is to integrate and coordinate the state's laws and institutions responsible for protecting and conserving ocean resources, including coastal waters and ocean ecosystems, to provide for public access to the ocean and ocean resources, including to marine protected areas, for recreational use, and aesthetic, educational, and scientific purposes, consistent with the sustainable long-term conservation of those resources, among other objectives. (PRC 35600 *et seq.*)
- 3) Directs the California Natural Resources Agency (NRA) to combat the biodiversity and climate crisis by, among other things, establishing the California Biodiversity Collaborative and establishing the 30x30 goal. (Executive Order No. N-82-20)
- 4) Establishes surfing as the official state sport. (Government Code 424.7)

THIS BILL:

- 1) Defines the following terms:
 - a) "Local government" as a city, county, or city and county, including a chartered city or county, with jurisdiction, in whole or in part, in the coastal zone; and,
 - b) "Surfing reserve" as an area designated pursuant to this chapter that would feature waves, surf zones, and surrounding environments, recognize the surfing area's environmental, cultural, and historical significance, and meet OPC's standard as an "other effective area-based conservation measure" as described in the "30x30 Decision-Making Framework for Coastal Waters."
- 2) Requires, on or before July 1, 2027, OPC to establish criteria and an application process for purposes of designating an area of the coastline as a state surfing reserve. Authorizes OPC to require, as one of the criteria, a letter of recommendation for the designation of a state surfing reserve from the California Coastal Commission (Commission).

- 3) Requires OPC, when establishing criteria for purposes of the state surfing reserve designation, to consider factors, including, but not limited to, wave quality and consistency, surf culture and history, environmental characteristics, and management priorities.
- 4) Authorizes a local government, after adopting a formal resolution, to apply to OPC for purposes of designating an area of the coastline within the jurisdiction of the local government as a state surfing reserve.
- 5) Requires the local government to include in its application all of the following:
 - a) A description of the proposed surfing reserve, including the specific geographic location and coastal access;
 - b) A description of the cultural, historical, ecological, and economic value of the proposed surfing reserve;
 - c) Management priorities for the surfing reserve; and,
 - d) Any other eligibility criteria required by OPC.
- 6) Requires OPC to approve the application from the local government if the area of the coastline meets the established criteria.
- 7) Requires OPC, once the application is approved, to designate the area as a state surfing reserve.
- 8) Requires OPC, as appropriate, and upon appropriation by the Legislature, to publicize approved surfing reserves and partner with local governments to erect signs designating approved surfing reserves.
- 9) Authorizes OPC to accept donations.
- 10) Authorizes OPC, if, at any time, it determines that the designated state surfing reserve no longer meets the criteria, to revoke its designation as a state surfing reserve.
- 11) Requires OPC to include designated state surfing reserves in the state's goal to conserve at least 30% of coastal waters pursuant to 30x30 goals.

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS:

1) **Author's statement:**

With a coastline that spans 1,100 miles, our state is home to a number of world-famous surf breaks including Malibu, Rincon, Trestles, and Mavericks. These breaks are destinations for millions of domestic and international surfers, and generate several billion dollars of economic activity every year. While the state is a leader in ocean conservation, California does not have a policy framework designed to specifically protect surf resources, which are all the natural resources and conditions that work together to create surfable waves.

Climate change, coastal erosion and pollution are damaging the health and longevity of California's surfing communities. A lack of official recognition of California's surfing areas prevents the state from elevating urgently needed coastal stewardship opportunities that acknowledge the role surfing and its community play in protecting our coast.

Designating surf reserves will empower local communities to implement conservation measures, improve water quality, and enhance coastal access for generations to come.

- 2) **Surfing in California.** Surfing competitions were established along the California coast during the 1920s, and a booming surf culture was created when the automobile became readily accessible, enabling inland individuals to visit the coast. Today, surfing is an iconic California sport, and the state is home to a number of world-famous surf breaks like Malibu, Trestles, Mavericks, Rincon, Steamer Lane, Ocean Beach, and Huntington Beach, which are destinations for both domestic and international surfers. Every year, California hosts numerous domestic and international surf events, including the International Surf Festival, the U.S. Open of Surfing, and the Big Wave Surf Contest. California is also home to the Surfers' Hall of Fame, the International Surfing Museum, and the California Surf Museum.

The sport of surfing has buoyed both economic innovations and scientific advancements. The commercial surfboard industry started in California in the 1950s. The science of wave forecasting was pioneered at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego and allows surfers to predict when and where to go surfing all over the world. The invention of world's first neoprene wetsuit is attributed to a physicist at the University of California at Berkeley.

The United States is home to approximately 3.3 million surfers, who spend between \$1.9 and \$3.3 billion each year on local surf trips. Professional surfers brought in \$140 billion in domestic surf tourism in California in 2018 alone, and the surf industry, which is almost exclusively based in California, generates more than \$6 billion in United States annual retail sales. Additionally, a report published by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, indicated that California has the highest number of individuals who surf in the country.



Surfing today is one of the fastest-growing sports in the world with the Summer Olympics now including surfing as an event. In 2028, Los Angeles will host the Summer Olympics with surfing events, highlighting both the sport and California's waves for the world to see.

In recognition of the importance and contributions of surfing to California, in 2018, the Legislature enacted AB 1782 (Gray), Chapter 162, Statutes of 2018, to name surfing the official sport of California. That same year, the Legislature named September 20 as California Surfing Day.

- 3) **Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECM).** The term ‘other effective area-based conservation measure’ describes a geographic site that is not within a protected area but that delivers long-term biodiversity conservation that is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant value. Protected areas and OECMs have a subtle yet critical distinction. Protected areas are designated and managed with a primary conservation objective in mind, such as preserving habitat for endangered species. Their core function is to promote the conservation of biodiversity within a given site. OECMs are defined as managed areas that deliver effective conservation of biodiversity within a given site, regardless of whether that is the goal.

The OPC’s most recently adopted 30x30 Decision-Making Framework for Coastal Waters states:

To qualify as a 30x30 Conservation Area, OECMs must also demonstrate that they promote access to nature and climate mitigation or resilience. Confirmed OECMs in coastal waters that also provide access and climate resilience benefits will qualify as 30x30 Conservation Areas.

AB 1938 allows for a surfing reserve designation, in part, if the area meets OPC’s standard as an OECM.

- 4) **Benefits of designated surfing reserves.** In addition to honoring the cultural and recreational benefits of surfing, designation could attract tourists, and designations would also instill a reverence for the coastline’s recreational values, coastal views, and the “blue spaces” both Californians and tourists seek out. Save the Waves, a California-based nonprofit with the goal of protecting 1,000 surf ecosystems by 2030, created a program 15 years ago that identifies, designates, and preserves outstanding waves, surf zones, and their surrounding environments around the world as World Surfing Reserves. There are 13 designated sites worldwide with two in California: Santa Cruz and Malibu.

A joint study between the Center for Responsible Travel at Stanford University and the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization on the economic value of Mavericks found that the average visitor received \$57 in consumer surplus per trip to Mavericks. In other words, the visitor received \$57 in additional value that was received from either surfing or watching the wave. With an estimated 421,431 visitors annually, the net economic value of Mavericks is about \$24 million dollars.

- 5) **Local control.** To designate a surfing reserve, the onus is on a local government that wants the designation. The bill requires a local government to adopt a formal resolution and submit an application to OPC with information related to geography and coastal access; description of the cultural, historical, ecological, and economic value of the proposed surfing reserve; and, management priorities. If the application meets the OPC’s criteria, the area earns its designation. Surfing status is revocable if the reserve fails at any time to meet the criteria.

- 6) **Committee amendments.** The *Committee may wish to consider the* following amendments:
- a) Strike the option for the OPC to require a letter of recommendation from the Coastal Commission and allow for letters from any public agency or coastal organization.
 - b) Strike reference to management plans and instead refer to compliance with applicable local and state laws.
 - c) Require, if OPC revokes a designation that no longer meets the criteria, any signage to be removed upon revocation of designation.
 - d) Strike requirements for OPC to publicize surfing reserves and accept donations.
 - e) Strike references to 30x30 (per author's request)

7) **Related legislation:**

AB 452 (Irwin, 2025) was identical to AB 2177. It was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 2177 (Irwin, 2022) Requires, on or before July 1, 2026, the State Coastal Conservancy to establish criteria and an application process for purposes of designating an area of the coastline as a state surfing reserve. It was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

ACR 116 (Nguyen) 2022 recognizes September 20, 2022, and every year on that date thereafter, as California Surfing Day to celebrate the California surfing lifestyle.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California State Association of Counties (CSAC)
Center for Coastal Resilience at UC Santa Cruz
City of Santa Cruz
League of California Cities
Richard Schmidt Surf School
Santa Cruz Longboard Union
Save the Waves Coalition
Surf Industry Members Association
Surfrider Foundation
US Board Riders Clubs

Opposition

Sea of Clouds

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