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# California State Senate

SENATOR  
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EIGHTEENTH SENATE DISTRICT



COMMITTEES  
BUDGET SUBCOMMITTEE #4 ON  
STATE ADMINISTRATION AND  
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HOUSING  
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## SB 534 – Salton Sea Region Green Empowerment Zone

The Salton Sea Region suffers from a historic lack of public and private investment, which results in inadequate infrastructure to support economic development, poor air quality, high unemployment, workers without advanced and specialized skills, and limited access to health care. The California Environmental Protection Agency's [CalEnviroScreen mapping tool](#) identifies a majority of census tracts in the region as disadvantaged and disproportionately burdened by multiple sources of pollution.

Today, the Salton Sea Region stands at a critical juncture, with a chance to become a major domestic supplier of lithium. This opportunity could drive regional prosperity and create high-paid jobs, supported by well-articulated workforce training programs, expanded local supply chains, and new battery manufacturing and related R&D facilities. Central to this prosperity scenario is the region's ability to unite and attract private and public investment, paving the way for a brighter future.

Unfortunately, the region has experienced major boom-and-bust cycles - economic promises that have failed to deliver sustainable quality-of-life improvements to the residents and local communities. Name the state statistic, and Imperial County is usually near the top or the bottom, whichever is worse: unemployment, per capita income, welfare recipients, families below the poverty line, elderly living in poverty, and so on.

In 2020, Governor Newsom [signed legislation](#) establishing the [Blue Ribbon Commission on Lithium Extraction in California](#). The commission brought together a broad spectrum of government, nonprofit, and other private sector stakeholders to help the state better understand lithium recovery's opportunities and potential challenges in California and the Salton Sea Region.

In its December 2022 report, the Blue Ribbon Commission recommended the establishment of an economic zone that would include Imperial County and the Eastern Coachella and Palo Verde Valleys. Federal, state, and local governments would recognize this zone, which would be eligible to compete for funding and investments.

To capture the full benefits of Lithium Valley renewable energy development, the southeastern desert valleys need a definitive economic development designation and structure that supports efficient resource attraction and fosters economic relationships between business, labor, and community.

SB 534 would establish the Salton Sea Region Green Empowerment Zone.

1. States the Zone's purpose is to attract public and private investments by facilitating regional collaboration and strategically leveraging economic, workforce, and community development incentives.
2. Highlights attracting investments to historically overlooked and left behind areas in the region.

3. Sets the maximum Zone boundaries to align with those identified in the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission on the Development of Lithium Valley.
4. Authorizes a process for initiating the formation of the Empowerment Zone, which includes Imperial County adopting the first resolution and other jurisdictions adopting resolutions to join the Zone.
5. Requires the Empowerment Zone to be governed by a 54-member board of directors, including voting and non-voting members. The voting membership comprises representatives from nine stakeholder groups within the region.
6. Requires the formation of an executive committee to help facilitate the Board’s activities.
7. Requires annual reporting based on specific metrics related to Empowerment Zone activities.
8. Sunsets the Zone on January 1, 2035.

The region faces historic economic challenges and systemic barriers to sustained, action-oriented collaboration. A Green Empowerment Zone provides a platform for collaborating on and leveraging other efforts that benefit the region. These efforts include the California Jobs First Regional Investment Initiative, the High Road Training Partnership on Lithium, and the Lithium Valley Specific Plan. SB 534 is modeled after a previously established Green Empowerment Zone in Contra Costa and would allow the region to develop increased capacity, redress disparities, and draw down economic opportunities needed to sustain economic development.

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### **Support**

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- Alianza Coachella Valley (joint sponsor)
- Communities for a New California (CNC) Action Fund