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Bay Area's giant 550-mile trail could earn same status as Pacific Crest Trail

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By **Gregory Thomas**, Staff Writer

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A portion of the Bay Area Ridge Trail can be seen on the edge of San Jose's Creekland neighborhood in July 2021. The work in progress, with 550 miles of proposed route that would circumvent the nine-county region, now has more than 400 miles of completed trail.

Brontë Wittpenn/S.F. Chronicle

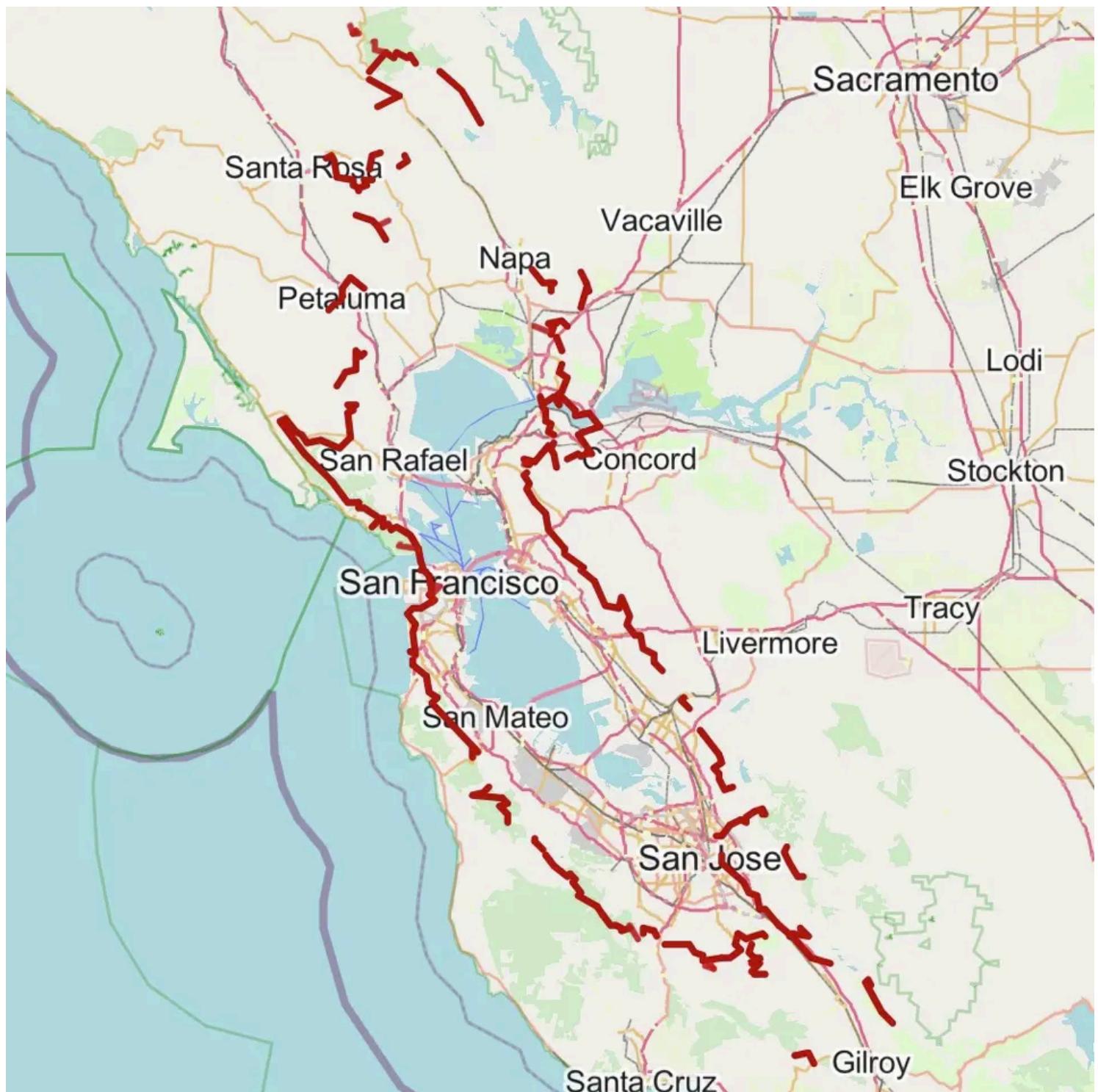
A 550-mile hiking-and-biking trail encircling the Bay Area might soon gain a prized federal recognition that would put it in the same class as the Pacific Crest Trail and Appalachian Trail.

New legislation introduced Wednesday in the U.S. House of Representatives would designate the Bay Area Ridge Trail — a mostly complete hiking route that weaves a giant loop through the nine-county region — as a National Scenic Trail. There are only 11 such trails in the country, including several world-class thru-hikes.

Advocates say achieving the illustrious status would boost the trail's profile and help garner the support and resources needed to fully finish the route. Of the 550 miles drawn up in the ridge trail concept, 415 miles are on the ground, meaning the trail is 75% complete.

The trail is something of a hybrid in that it largely traces the Bay Area's undeveloped hillsides — with unbroken segments traversing the Santa Cruz Range and the East Bay hills — but also contains paved stretches that pass through the city centers in San Francisco and San Jose.

“The Bay Area Ridge Trail is a crown jewel of our region, providing millions of people with access to some of the most stunning natural landscapes in the country and connecting our communities to the outdoors,” Democratic Rep. Jared Huffman, who represents the North Bay and is championing the legislation, said in a statement. “Designating it as a National Scenic Trail would not only help complete it ... this would be a major boost for the recreation economy, and our bill gets that ball rolling.”



The completed portions of the proposed 550-mile Bay Area Ridge Trail as of January 2026.

Bay Area Ridge Trail Council

In many places, the ridge trail effectively knits together existing trails built and managed by regional parks and local open space districts. But a major hurdle to bringing the full 550-mile thru-hike to fruition is a series of roughly 120 outstanding gaps — smaller pieces that pass through private lands, highway crossings or especially difficult terrain. Advocates hope the National Scenic Trail

designation would help facilitate their efforts to close the gaps and link the whole vision together.

“The recognition would be a stamp of approval from the federal government that this land is important and valued and should be protected for conservation purposes and outdoor recreation,” said Marie Sayles, development director at the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, the nonprofit working to complete the trail. “It could expedite the process by putting more eyes on the trail and building awareness with the greater community, which could help with funding and making sure the ridge trail is on master planning documents and the like.”



The Bay Area Ridge Trail at Glen Cove Waterfront Park in Vallejo draws people and pets in 2017.
Laura Morton/For the S.F. Chronicle

The National Scenic Trail classification applies to a trail that is at least 100 miles long, “provides maximum outdoor recreation potential,” and “provides for enjoyment of nationally significant scenic, historic and cultural qualities,” among other criteria.

The bill was introduced by Huffman, Sens. Adam Schiff and Alex Padilla, and a delegation of Bay Area legislators. If approved, it would require the National Park Service to perform a feasibility study on assigning the designation within one year.

Correction: A previous version of this article misstated where Rep. Jared Huffman’s bill was introduced. It was in the House of Representatives.

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Gregory Thomas

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Gregory Thomas is The Chronicle's Editor of Travel and Outdoors, focusing on California activities and destinations. Before that, he served as Senior Editor at Outside Magazine in New Mexico where he edited news, enterprise stories, and features in print and online. He's worked at a tech-media startup, reported for major metro newspapers, written features for national magazines, and done his share of internships. He holds a Master's degree in journalism from UC Berkeley.