

Date of Hearing: April 9, 2024

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

AB 3163 (Mathis) – As Amended April 4, 2024

SUBJECT: State parks: armed services: fee waiver

SUMMARY: Expands the authority of the Departments Parks and Recreation (State Parks) to offer reduced fee or free day use of state parks operated by State Parks to veterans, active duty, or reserve military personnel to any additional days State Parks finds appropriate.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the California state park system and vests State Parks with control of the state park system and responsibility for administering, protecting, developing, and interpreting state parks for the use and enjoyment of the public. Requires State Parks to protect the state park system from damage and to preserve the peace therein [Public Resources Code (PRC) § 5001 *et seq.*].
- 2) Limits attendance at the state park system to within limits established by carrying capacity (PRC § 5001.96, § 5019.5).
- 3) Authorizes State Parks to collect fees, rents, and returns for use of any state park system area with some exceptions including:
 - a) Prohibits State Parks from collecting any fee from students in kindergarten through 12th grade on a school outing (PRC § 5010.2);
 - b) Authorizes State Parks to provide discounted passes to certain groups of people including fourth graders, seniors over the age of 62, disabled persons, and low-income residents, as defined (PRC § 5010.2.5, § 5011); and
 - c) Authorizes State Parks to issue a reduced fee or free day use permit to veterans, active duty military, and reserve military personnel on Memorial Day and Veterans Day (PRC § 5011.6).
- 4) Allows the Department of Veterans Affairs to sponsor a Gold Star Family specialized license plate programs and issue a license plate for a vehicle owned by an eligible Gold Star Family member (Vehicle Code § 5156).
- 5) Defines veteran (Military and Veterans Code § 980).
- 6) Requires the National Park and Federal Recreational Lands Pass be made available, at no charge, for the lifetime of the pass holder, to any member of a Gold Star family (families of fallen service members) who meets the eligibility requirements of section 3.2 of Department of Defense Instruction 1348.36, and other listed persons (U.S. Code Title 16 § 6804).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** This bill requires State Parks to grant free access to state parks to a veteran or active duty or reserve military personal. According to the author, “[This bill] is a commonsense bill that will give [State Parks] the authority and flexibility to offer additional free or reduced fee day use to California state parks to veterans and current service members, who deserve and need them the most.”
- 2) **Background.** There are 280 park units (beaches, historic sites, museums, off-highway vehicle recreation areas, parks, etc.) in the state park system. State Parks fully operates 189 of those park units. The remaining 91 park units are either fully operated or co-managed by park partners; of these, public agencies operate 44 park units, concessionaires operate one park unit, and 45 units are either fully operated or co-managed by nonprofit entities. Currently, 19 of the 91 park units operated by nonprofits, public agencies, or concessionaires do not accept passes. At most parks, day use fees are charged for vehicle day use only with no charge to walk or bike into the parks. These charges are generally \$10 per vehicle, but may increase on certain holidays or during peak season. Most historical parks and museums charge a day use fee per person.

Discounted passes. State Parks offers several forms of discounted pass. These include a Disabled Discount Pass (\$3.50), a California State Parks Golden Bear Pass for low income individuals (no cost), a California State Parks Limited Use Golden Bear Pass (\$20), and a Distinguished Veteran Pass (no cost). Distinguished veterans are defined as those who have been honorably discharged with 50% or greater service-connected disability, individuals held as prisoners of war, or recipients of the Medal of Honor. There are also two free entry pilot programs including the (1) California State Parks Adventure Pass that provides free entry for fourth graders and their families at 19 state parks throughout the state and (2) the California State Parks Library Pass that provide free passes to every public library throughout the state. All free and discounted entries are generally provided by a pass, with the exception being active duty and reserve military personnel and veterans receive free entry to most park units upon proof of service on Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

Federal parks Military Pass. A free lifetime Military Pass is available for U.S. military veterans and Gold Star Families. A free annual Military Pass is available for current U.S. military members and their dependents. The passes provide free access to more than 2,000 federal recreation areas, including national parks, wildlife refuges, and forests. According to the National Park Service (NPS), most national parks do not have entrance fees. NPS allows free admission to more than 400 national parks on six different days in 2024. According to NPS, national parks are economical, with entrance fees typically from \$5 to \$35.

Parks benefits. Generally, time spent outdoors is believed to reduce stress and improve mental health. Veterans and service members may particularly benefit from outdoor recreation for readjusting to civilian lifestyles and reducing PTSD symptoms.

- 3) **Double referral.** This bill is also referred to the Assembly Military and Veterans Affairs Committee.
- 4) **Related legislation.** AB 2713 (Hoover) of the current legislative session, requires the State Parks to grant free access to state parks to a veteran or active duty or reserve military personal. AB 2713 is set for hearing in this Committee.

AB 308 (Alanis) of 2023 would have required State Parks to grant free entry to state parks for eligible Gold Star Family members. AB 308 died in Assembly Appropriations.

AB 2128 (Cooley) of 2022 would have required State Parks to grant 50% discounted admission to the general public to each unit of the state park system operated by State Parks every year on September 9th, California Admissions Day. AB 2128 died in Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 1358 (Cooley) of 2017 would have provided 50% discounted admission to California State Parks on California Admission Day. AB 1358 was vetoed by Governor Brown. The veto message stated: “While this bill is well-intentioned, [State Parks] already has the authority to offer discounted or free park admissions to the public. Furthermore, for the past few years [State Parks] has worked closely with the Parks Forward Commission to develop initiatives to expand visitations, increase access, and ensure the system's long-term sustainability. The public and our state parks are better served by allowing [State Parks] the flexibility to manage its operations without mandates that may harm its fiscal stability.”

AB 240 (Wilk) of 2015 would have allowed free day use entry to state park to vehicles with specialized licenses plates for veterans who are high military honor recipients and Gold Star families. AB 240 was held in Senate Appropriations.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

None on file

Opposition

None on file

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