

Date of Hearing: March 25, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

AB 616 (Caloza) – As Introduced February 13, 2025

SUBJECT: Department of Parks and Recreation: state parks: California State Library Parks Pass Program

SUMMARY: Allows the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) to issue vehicle day use annual passes, free of charge, to the California State Library to support the California State Library Parks Pass Program (Program).

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).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** This bill allows State Parks to provide annual passes, free of charge, for the Program. According to the author, “[The Program] gives residents access to over 200 California State Parks at no cost, increasing public access to our iconic parks and open spaces. The lack of awareness and cost barriers are a large reason why these parks are heavily underutilized by our residents. [The Program] will help break down these barriers and encourage more Californians to fully explore and enjoy the outdoors.”
- 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 a 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 provides 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.

Library Parks Pass Program. In 2021, State Parks received funding to create a pilot Program, which has grown into today's Program. According to the March 19, 2025 agenda for Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 4 notes, data that State Parks has collected from surveys of Program users indicate that the Program serves participants across a range of incomes, including those at the lower end. Specifically, the survey found that 23% of respondents earn \$30,000 or less; 19% earn between \$30,001 and \$60,000; 15% earn between \$60,001 and \$90,000; and 11% report earning between \$90,001 and \$120,000. Among survey respondents, 64% identified costs as a factor for not previously visiting state parks. State Parks notes that while the Program is available throughout the state, State Parks has taken steps to increase access within lower-income communities by providing a larger proportion of passes to library branches located in areas with high poverty index percentages.

The budget. The Governor's 2025–26 budget proposes a one-time transfer of \$6.75 million from the General Fund to the State Park Recreation Fund for the Program in 2025–26. This proposal will provide 33,000 State Library Parks Passes to more than 1,100 library branch locations throughout the state. A single pass is valued at \$195, so this one time transfer covers the market value of the passes and at least some of the costs to operate the program.

- 3) **Policy considerations.** *This committee may wish to consider how to balance the expansion of free or discounted access opportunities with the acquisition and maintenance of property for both recreation and climate benefits, while ensuring adequate funding to achieve these goals.* While the fiscal impact of this bill is outside the scope of this committee's jurisdiction, given previous legislative efforts aimed at stabilizing State Parks' revenues, providing free access at this scale may run counter to the continued implementation of those reforms, as day-use fees are important to the financial stability of the park system. Funding for state parks fluctuates with California's economy. Over the decades, State Parks has been able to rely less and less on General Fund dollars, shifting more towards fees and the State Parks

Recreation Fund. The prevailing example of the fiscal challenges facing State Parks is its deferred maintenance backlog that is estimated to be just shy of \$2 billion. Granting State Parks the authority to provide these passes free of cost would be a requirement on State Parks to provide service but without financial support. The cost of this Program demonstrates that these programs are likely not absorbable by State Parks. It is also important to note that several State Park Properties have been recently devastated by fire (e.g., Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park, Will Rogers State Historic Park, Topanga State Park, and Big Basin State Park), which both reduce revenue streams as well as requiring costly repairs.

However, a reduced fee day could be viewed as complementary to other policies that encourage access to parks, which has been a priority for the Legislature in recent years. Additionally, free day use may encourage additional spending. According to data from the 2007–2009 Visitor Survey Report commissioned by State Parks, park visitors spend on average \$80.85 per visit, including \$31.32 within a 25-mile radius of the park and \$49.53 outside the 25-mile radius. Extrapolating from the 26 studied parks to park units statewide, state park visitors annually spend an estimated \$6 billion.¹ However, an important consideration is that because the Program is available to any Californian with a public library card, it is not as closely targeted toward residents with particular demographics as other free park pass programs the state operates.

- 4) **Arguments in support.** California State Parks Foundation, the sponsor of this bill, writes in support. They extol the benefits of the Program and express concern that the current budget situation will put the Program at risk. “[The Program] has provided hundreds of thousands of Californians opportunities to access our iconic state park system and connect with the outdoors. Among all the access programs and free entrance opportunities provided by [State Parks], [the Program] is the most widely accessible. [This bill] will weatherproof this important program from the ebbs and flows of the state budget forecast.”
- 5) **Related legislation.** AB 2713 (Hoover) of 2024 would have required State Parks to grant free access to state parks to a veteran or active duty or reserve military personal. AB 2713 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 3163 (Mathis) of 2024 would have expanded the authority of 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. AB 3163 was held in the Assembly Appropriations 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 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

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 was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

¹ Litzky, K. “California state parks: economic impact of visitor expenditures” Master of Public Policy and Administration, California State University, 2010.

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 the Senate Appropriations Committee.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

California State Parks Foundation (Sponsor)

Opposition

None on file

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