

Date of Hearing: March 28, 2023

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE
Rebecca Bauer-Kahan, Chair
AB 618 (Bauer-Kahan) – As Amended March 20, 2023

SUBJECT: State parks: reservations: discounts

SUMMARY: Requires changes to the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) reservation system; requires State Parks to institute a reservation lottery system, as specified; and grants a discount on camping for specified annual pass holders. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires any contract State Parks enters into, on and after January 1, 2024, for purposes of managing the State Parks reservation system, to include, but not be limited to, the following provisions:
 - a) A cancellation made within seven calendar days of the reservation start date shall result in credit that can be used for future reservations within five years of the original reservation start date;
 - b) The entire reservation cost shall be forfeited, and no credits shall be given, if the reservation holder does not show up within 24 hours of the reservation start time and the reservation holder has not provided advance notice to staff at the state park where the reservation is held;
 - c) The contractor shall send at least two reminder emails to reservation holders; and
 - d) Display the real-time availability of sites available for walk-up reservations.
- 2) Specifies that a person shall not be permitted to reserve a site at the same unit of the state park system for more than 30 total days in a calendar year.
- 3) Stipulates that a reservation at a site in a unit of the state park system shall not be for more than seven consecutive nights during peak season.
- 4) Requires State Parks to, on or before January 1, 2025, and until January 1, 2029, implement a reservation lottery system for up to five of the most popular units of the state park system, as determined by State Parks based on units that have the most booking interest six months before the reservation date. Requires State Parks to report, on or before January 1, 2028, information regarding the reservation lottery system to the Legislature.
- 5) Requires State Parks to grant a 25 percent discount for campsite or lodging reservations paid through the internet website www.reservecalifornia.com to the bearer of a “Golden Bear Pass.”

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 [Public Resources Code (PRC) § 5001 *et seq.*].

- 2) Authorizes State Parks to collect fees, rents, and returns for use of any state park system area with some exceptions (PRC § 5010).
- 3) Authorizes State Parks, whenever significant savings can be achieved, to enter into a contract with any natural person, corporation, partnership, or association for the operation of a reservation system for the state park system and for the collection of state park fees in connection therewith (PRC § 5010.1).
- 4) Establishes the “Golden Bear Pass” as a discount program available to specified persons, including seniors over the age of 62 with income under a specified threshold and low-income residents, upon application to State Parks, and waives the five-dollar fee through July 1, 2024 (PRC § 5011).
- 5) Permits free camping for distinguished veterans, as defined, or 50 percent reduced-fee camping for persons with permanent disabilities (PRC § 5011.5; § 5010).
- 6) Limits occupancy by the same persons, equipment, or vehicles of any camping facility to a total of 30 days in any calendar year in that unit, and specifies that State Parks may establish shorter or longer limits of occupancy (California Code of Regulations Title 14 § 4455).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** This bill would require changes to the State Parks reservation system. In addition, State Parks would be required to implement a new reservation lottery system and offer a discount on camping fees to holders of the Golden Bear Pass. According to the author, “All Californians should have equal opportunities and access to reserve a campsite within our public parks. [This bill] promotes outdoor access for everyone by requiring State Parks to adopt modifications to the online camping registration system that deter late cancellations and no-shows.”
- 2) **Background.** State Parks oversees 280 park units throughout the state, with more than 15,000 campsites and other lodging options, like rustic cabins, cottages, tent cabins, floating campsites, and yurts. For many of these locations, reservations are available six months in advance of the arrival date through an online or phone-based reservation system called Reserve California, which is managed by a contracted vendor. Not all state park units utilize the Reserve California system, with roughly 150 park units lacking internet connectivity. The current reservation system contract expires in 2024. State Parks anticipates issuing a request for proposals (RFP) in Spring 2023 and awarding a new contract by August 2023.

Many camping and lodging locations are very popular and some sites are reserved within minutes of becoming available. State Parks estimates there are about 10 very popular locations. All sites become available for reservations at 8 AM six months prior to the reservation start date. However, there are anecdotal stories of fully reserved popular campsites with many empty spots due to no-shows.¹ State Parks estimates a system wide cancellation rate of 15 percent. It is unclear if this figure includes no-shows.

¹ See <https://www.outsideonline.com/adventure-travel/news-analysis/camping-reservations-no-shows/>

The maximum financial consequence for booking a site and then not showing up is typically the forfeiture of the cost of a single night plus a reservation fee. The current reservation system vendor does not send reminder emails to reservation holders prior to the reservation start date.

This bill requires any contract State Parks enters into, on and after January 1, 2024, for purposes of managing the State Parks reservation system to include provisions to incentivize early cancellations by increasing the financial consequences of a late cancellation or no-show. For example, under this bill, the maximum financial consequence would be the entire reservation cost plus fees for reservation holders that do not show up for their reserved site.

No-show sites are made available for walkup reservations 24 hours after the original reservation start time. Some park units are walkup only, but a long-term goal is to move all park units to the reservation system as internet availability allows.

Reservation lottery example. This bill defers to State Parks as to how to design an equitable lottery process that increases access to some of the most popular camping sites. The National Park Service implemented an early access lottery system for the 2022 and 2023 camping seasons at the North Pines Campground in Yosemite National Park.² The goals of the lottery were to: create a better experience that reduces confusion and frustration for the highly competitive reservation process; offer a new method for reserving campsites at this high-demand location for a more equitable experience; and address visitor complaints about the perception of an unfair reservation process.

Successful lottery applicants had an opportunity to make a reservation for campsites in North Pines Campground during a less-competitive early access period. Following the early access period, any remaining availability was released on the usual on-sale dates (five months in advance on the 15th of the month). During the 2022 lottery pilot, there were 22,033 applications for the 640 time slots, resulting in a success rate of 2.9 percent. Of people awarded an early access time slot, 82.5 percent made a reservation, resulting in 48 percent of availability being booked. In 2023, there were 2,500 time slots, but data is not yet available about applications and bookings made.

Annual passes. State Parks has several annual passes that grant day use to pass holders. Camping discounts are not typical for annual pass holders, except for the Disabled Discount Pass and the Distinguished Veteran Pass. The Golden Bear Pass is offered free to CalWORKs recipients, supplemental security income (SSI) recipients, and those whose incomes fall under a certain threshold. Since the five-dollar fee was waived and enhanced coordination with CalWORKS began in 2021, the number of annual Golden Bear Passholders has increased from roughly 2,000 to 35,000 in 2022.

Towards equitable access. In recent years the demand for public campsites has increased as more people are heading to the outdoors for their well-being and mental health. It is the mission of State Parks to create “opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation” for all Californians. However, not all Californians have historically enjoyed the same access to

² See <https://www.nps.gov/yose/playourvisit/lottery-pilot.htm> for more information.

public spaces such as parks and beaches. Systemic barriers persist in keeping communities of color, persons with disabilities, and other groups out of public parks and beaches. State Parks has publicly recognized these systemic barriers to access and has committed to providing equitable access to high-quality outdoor recreation for underrepresented park users and underserved communities.

The California Outdoors for All initiative is focused on equitably expanding outdoor access to all Californians through focused investments in open space infrastructure, outdoor programming, and improvements to state systems. These efforts seek to undo deeply ingrained inequities, and preserve the cherished natural, cultural, and tribal resources as the fight against climate change intensifies. Additionally, the Outdoors for All initiative further advances two other state priorities, Nature Based Solutions and 30x30, by investing in California’s public lands and natural resources. A draft strategy is planned for release in Spring 2023.

- 3) **Policy considerations.** The author may want to consider pursuing an urgency clause in order to align the goals of this bill with the anticipated timing for the release of an RFP related to the next contract for the reservation system.
- 4) **Arguments in support.** The California State Parks Foundation writes in support, stating that this bill “proposes changes to the reservation system that incentivize early cancellations, which in turn should make more campsites available to everyone. [...] [E]veryone should get to enjoy our amazing state parks and [this bill] implements common sense changes to get more people into these beautiful places.
- 5) **Related legislation.** AB 148 (Committee on Budget), Chapter 115, Statutes of 2021, eliminates the Golden Bear Pass fee through July 1, 2024, among other provisions.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California State Parks Foundation

Opposition

None on file

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