
THIRD READING

Bill No: AB 618
Author: Bauer-Kahan (D), et al.
Amended: 9/8/23 in Senate
Vote: 21

SENATE NATURAL RES. & WATER COMMITTEE: 9-0, 7/3/23
AYES: Min, Seyarto, Allen, Dahle, Eggman, Limón, McGuire, Padilla, Stern
NO VOTE RECORDED: Grove, Hurtado

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE: 5-0, 9/1/23
AYES: Portantino, Ashby, Bradford, Wahab, Wiener
NO VOTE RECORDED: Jones, Seyarto

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 79-0, 5/31/23 - See last page for vote

SUBJECT: State parks: reservations

SOURCE: Author

DIGEST: This bill requires any contract entered into by the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks or department) to manage the department’s reservation system to reflect certain rules, authorizations, and requirements, as specified. Further, the bill requires State Parks, by January 1, 2025, and through January 1, 2029, to implement a reservation drawing for up to five of the most popular units of the state park system and to report on the outcomes of the reservation drawing to the Legislature.

Senate Floor Amendments of 9/8/23 change some “shall” statements to “may” statements and make some technical and clarifying changes. Specifically, the amendments:

- Require any contract entered into by State Parks for purposes of managing State Parks’ reservation system to reflect the authorizations of the bill.

- Authorize rather than require State Parks to impose restrictions on how reservations are made through the online reservation system, as specified.
- Provide that a reservationholder who cancels a reservation within a specified timeframe may (rather than shall) forfeit the entire cost of the reservation plus any reservation fees.
- Provide that a reservationholder who cancels a reservation or fails to show up within a specified timeframe may (rather than shall) forfeit the entire cost of the reservation plus any reservation fees.
- Provide that a reservation holder may (rather than be required to) either show up or provide notice of late arrival under specified circumstances in order to avoid forfeiting the entire cost of the reservation.
- Provide that a camp or lodging site for which a reservationholder cancels a reservation within a specified timeframe may (rather than be required to) be made available for reservation through the online reservation system.
- Make technical changes regarding communication to a reservationholder.
- Make clarifying changes regarding a report to the Legislature.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Establishes State Parks within the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) under the control of the director. (Public Resources Code (PRC) section (§) 501.)
- 2) Vests State Parks with control of the state park system (PRC §5001) and directs State Parks to:
 - a) Administer, protect, develop, and interpret the state park system for the use and enjoyment of the public. (PRC §5003.)
 - b) Protect the state park system from damage and preserve the peace. (PRC §5008.)
- 3) Authorizes, whenever significant savings can be achieved, State Parks to enter into a contract to operate a reservation system for the state park system, including the associated collection of state park fees. The contract may provide

for the retention of a portion of every fee or the imposition of a surcharge as reimbursement for the cost of providing that service. (PRC §5010.1.)

- 4) 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. (Title 14, California Code of Regulations §4455.)

This bill requires any contract entered into by State Parks to manage the department's reservation system to reflect certain rules, authorizations, and requirements, as specified. Further, this bill requires State Parks, by January 1, 2025, and through January 1, 2029, to implement a reservation drawing for up to five of the most popular units of the state park system and to report on the outcomes of the reservation drawing to the Legislature. Specifically, this bill:

- 1) Requires, on and after January 1, 2024, any contract that State Parks enters into to manage the department's reservation system to reflect the following rules, authorizations, and requirements:
 - a) For units of the state park system operated by State Parks, the department may restrict a person from reserving a site under any of the following circumstances:
 - i) For more than seven consecutive nights during peak season.
 - ii) If that person has occupied a site at the same unit proposed for reservation for more than 30 days in a calendar year.
 - iii) By using the online reservation system if that person failed to show up for at least three reservations in one calendar year.
 - (1) The person's ability to reserve a site using the online reservation system may resume within one calendar year from the date of the reservationholder's third failure to show up for a reservation.
 - (2) This shall not apply to reservations and occupation of sites obtained using walkup reservations or first-come-first-served systems.
 - b) A reservationholder who cancels a reservation:
 - i) Seven calendar days or more before the reservation start date shall receive a refund of the cost of the reservation, excluding any reservation fees;

- ii) Within two to six calendar days before the reservation start date may forfeit the cost of the reservation for the first night plus any reservation fees; or,
 - iii) Fails to show up within 24 hours of the reservation start date may forfeit the entire cost of the reservation plus any reservation fees.
- c) A reservationholder may either show up or provide notice of late arrival to staff at the state park unit where the reservation is held within 24 hours of the reservation start date in order to avoid forfeiting the entire cost of the reservation.
 - d) A camp or lodging site for which the reservationholder cancels a reservation three calendar days or more before the reservation start date may be made available for reservation through the online reservation system.
 - e) A reservationholder shall receive at least two reminders via email or another form of communication that informs them of cancellation by specified times in order to receive a refund or a credit, as specified.
 - f) As part of the communication described in e), a reservationholder shall be informed that the entire cost of the reservation plus any reservation fees may be forfeited if the reservationholder:
 - i) Cancels within 24 hours of the reservation start date; or,
 - ii) Fails to either show up or notify staff at the state park unit where the reservation is held of a late arrival no later than 24 hours following the reservation start date.
- 2) Requires forfeited reservation costs, as specified, to be deposited into the State Parks and Recreation Fund and provides that this funding may be used, upon appropriation by the Legislature, for deferred maintenance projects.
 - 3) Provides that the rules and requirements in 1) only apply to a camp or lodging site that uses the reservation system, as specified.
 - 4) Requires State Parks, by January 1, 2025, and through January 1, 2029, to implement a reservation drawing for up to five of the most popular units of the state park system.
 - a) Requires State Parks to determine the top units based on units that have the most booking interest six months before the reservation date.

- b) Authorizes State Parks, at any unit of the state park system determined as most popular to use the online reservation system for a subset of camping or lodging sites within that unit in order to provide an analysis between the reservation drawing process and the existing reservation system processes.
- c) Requires State Parks, by January 1, 2028, to provide a report to the Legislature on the outcomes of the reservation drawing, as specified.

Background

State Parks oversees 280 park units throughout the state, with more than 15,000 camp sites and other lodging options, like rustic cabins, cottages, tent cabins, floating campsites, and yurts. For many of these locations, reservations are available in advance of the arrival date through an online or phone-based reservation system called Reserve California. This system is managed by a contracted vendor. Sites become available for reservation on a rolling basis at 8 am, six months prior to the reservation start date.

In recent years, the demand for public campsites has skyrocketed as more people are heading outdoors for their well-being and mental health. Many camping and lodging locations are very popular and sites are reserved within minutes of being offered. Currently, there are few consequences for booking a site and then cancelling right before the reservation start date or not showing up at all. 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.

As a result of no-shows, sites may appear to be unoccupied but they are reserved and cannot be made available to other interested people for at least 24 hours. There are anecdotal stories of fully reserved popular campgrounds with many empty spots due to no-shows. (See <https://www.outsideonline.com/adventure-travel/news-analysis/camping-reservations-no-shows/>). According to State Parks, its cancellation rate is approximately 15 percent. It is unclear whether that figure includes no-shows.

Comments

Reforming the online reservation system. This bill requires any contract State Parks enters into, on and after January 1, 2024, for purposes of managing the State Parks reservation system – Reserve California – to include provisions to incentivize early cancellations for those who do not plan to use their reservations. Further, the reservation drawing pilot program proposed by this bill for the five most popular state park units would test whether a drawing process might level the

playing field for people to access the most competitive camping grounds. Importantly, under this bill, those units would still have some sites available through the normal reservation process to provide a comparison.

Reservation lottery example. This bill defers to State Parks as to how to design an equitable reservation drawing 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. 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. 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.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: No

According to the Senate Appropriations Committee, unknown, potentially significant ongoing costs, possibly in the hundreds of thousands or low millions of dollars annually (State Parks and Recreation Fund [SPRF] or General Fund) for State Parks to implement the provisions of this bill. In addition, to the extent that this bill results in forfeited reservations costs that otherwise would have been refunded, it could result in potential revenue increases of an unknown amount (SPRF).

SUPPORT: (Verified 9/8/23)

California State Parks Foundation

OPPOSITION: (Verified 9/8/23)

None received

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: According to the author, “All Californians should have equal opportunities and access to reserve a campsite within our public parks. AB 618 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.”

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 79-0, 5/31/23

AYES: Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Alanis, Alvarez, Arambula, Bains, Bauer-Kahan, Bennett, Berman, Boerner, Bonta, Bryan, Calderon, Juan Carrillo, Wendy Carrillo, Cervantes, Chen, Connolly, Megan Dahle, Davies, Dixon, Flora, Mike Fong, Vince Fong, Friedman, Gabriel, Gallagher, Garcia, Gipson, Grayson, Haney, Hart, Holden, Hoover, Irwin, Jackson, Jones-Sawyer, Kalra, Lackey, Lee, Low, Lowenthal, Maienschein, Mathis, McCarty, McKinnor, Muratsuchi, Stephanie Nguyen, Ortega, Pacheco, Papan, Jim Patterson, Joe Patterson, Pellerin, Petrie-Norris, Quirk-Silva, Ramos, Reyes, Luz Rivas, Robert Rivas, Rodriguez, Blanca Rubio, Sanchez, Santiago, Schiavo, Soria, Ta, Ting, Valencia, Villapudua, Waldron, Wallis, Ward, Weber, Wicks, Wilson, Wood, Zbur, Rendon

NO VOTE RECORDED: Essayli

Prepared by: Catherine Baxter / N.R. & W. / (916) 651-4116
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**** END ****