

Date of Hearing: March 24, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

AB 1702 (Johnson) – As Introduced February 4, 2026

SUBJECT: State park system: admission: veterans and military personnel

SUMMARY: Requires the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) to issue a veteran a 15% discount for access to the state park system. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Removes the requirement that a veteran be a veteran of a war in which the United States has been or may be engaged, to receive a state park pass.
- 2) Requires State Parks to issue a discount pass that entitles the bearer to 15% off the cost to use all facilities, including boat launch facilities, in units of the state park system, upon presentation of proof of service.

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 the 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 § 5011.5, § 5011.6).
- 4) Requires the National Park and Federal Recreational Lands Pass to be made available, at no charge, for the lifetime of the pass holder, to any member of a Gold Star family who meets the eligibility requirements of section 3.2 of Department of Defense Instruction 1348.36, and other listed persons (Title 16 U.S. Code § 6804).
- 5) Defines veteran (Military and Veterans Code § 980).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** According to the author, “California is home to one of the largest veteran populations in the nation, but for too long, a high cost of entry and access has prevented our veterans and service members from experiencing California State Parks. [This bill] directly addressed this problem by expanding eligibility for the Distinguished Veteran Pass and providing discounted access for all current and former service members. Our State Parks should be a place of healing and connection for those who served. As the daughter of veterans, I know firsthand the sacrifices military families make. I grew up seeing that dedication, and that’s why I’m so passionate about honoring our heroes in California. It’s time we modernize our laws to reflect the service of every man and woman in uniform.”
- 2) **Background.** There are 280 park units (beaches, historic sites, museums, off-highway vehicle recreation areas, parks, etc.) in the state park system. At most parks, day use fees are charged per vehicle and average around \$10, with no charge to walk or bike into the parks. 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.

The Distinguished Veterans Pass was issued 7,146 times in 2024.

Federal parks Military Pass. A free lifetime Military Pass is available for U.S. military veterans and Gold Star Families (families of fallen service members). 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.

Benefits of the outdoors. 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) **Policy considerations.** 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, a broad-based, discounted pass may run counter to the continued implementation of those reforms, as day-use fees are important to the financial stability of the park system. However, a reduced fee 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, reduced day-use fees may encourage additional spending in communities that surround state parks. 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 parks studied to park units statewide, state park visitors annually spend an estimated \$6 billion.¹

- 4) **Arguments in support.** The Southwest California Legislative Council writes that this bill is a “meaningful expression of gratitude” for the sacrifice of veterans.
- 5) **Double referral.** This bill is also referred to the Assembly Military and Veterans Affairs Committee.
- 6) **Related legislation.** SB 893 (Seyarto) of the current legislative session requires State Parks to issue a pass to a Gold Star Family member for use of all facilities in units of the state park system. SB 893 is set for hearing in the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee.

SB 55 (Umberg) of 2025 would have required State Parks to issue a pass to a Gold Star Family member for use of all facilities in units of the state park system. SB 55 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 2713 (Hoover) of 2024 would have required State Parks to grant free access to state parks to veterans or active-duty military. AB 2713 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 3163 (Mathis) of 2024 would have expanded the authority of State Parks to grant reduced or free day use of a state park to any day 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.

AB 1358 (Cooley) of 2018 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, the department already has the authority to offer discounted or free park admissions to the public. Furthermore, for the past few years the department 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 the department the flexibility to manage its operations without mandates that may harm its fiscal stability.”

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

AB 240 (Wilk) of 2015 would have allowed free day use entry to state park to vehicles with specialized license 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

Southwest California Legislative Council

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Stephanie Mitchell / W., P., & W. / (916) 319-2096