

Date of Hearing: April 29, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

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

Policy Committee:	Water, Parks and Wildlife	Vote:	12 - 0
	Military and Veterans Affairs		8 - 0

Urgency: No                      State Mandated Local Program: No                      Reimbursable: No

**SUMMARY:**

This bill (1) removes an existing requirement that a veteran be a veteran “of a war in which the United States has been, or may be engaged,” to be issued a distinguished veteran pass and (2) requires the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) to issue a discount pass to a veteran, as defined, or an active- or reserve-duty member of the Armed Forces of the United States or the National Guard of any state, upon presentation to State Parks of proof of their active- or reserve-duty status or proof of honorable discharge from service. Such a discounted pass entitles the bearer to 15% off the cost to use all facilities, including boat launching facilities, in units of the state park system.

**FISCAL EFFECT:**

- 1) State Parks estimates one-time General Fund costs of roughly \$200,000 to promulgate regulations and ongoing annual General Fund costs of about \$135,000 for one position in its pass office to accommodate the increased workload associated with administering the new pass. While State Parks already offers a number of discounted passes, the department notes it cannot accommodate the additional workload this bill will generate within existing resources, particularly since the bill entitles pass-holders to discounted boat launching benefits that the department contends will be fairly popular and require eligibility validation.

The Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) recently warned of General Fund structural deficits of around \$35 billion per year in the 2027-28 fiscal year (FY) and ongoing.

- 2) Forgone annual revenue of an unknown amount (State Parks and Recreation Fund (SPRF)) resulting from the expanded reach of the distinguished veteran pass and discounted use of all facilities in units of the state park system for specified entities that would otherwise require payment of fees from park and park facility users. For context, as of March 2025, State Parks reports it had approximately 45,000 active distinguished veteran passes, with an average annual increase of 5,500 passes. Between 2022 and 2024, about 8,370 passholders made reservations that would have generated roughly \$2 million for the SPRF.

In February 2024, the LAO projected the SPRF to have an annual gap of approximately \$18 million between its estimated revenues and projected expenditures in each of the next few years. This structural deficit would cause SPRF to become insolvent before the end of FY 2029-30.

**COMMENTS:**

1) **Purpose.** 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.

2) **Background. *Discounted State Park Passes.*** State Parks offers several discounted or free park admission opportunities for specific populations. Eligibility criteria and levels of park access vary across these passes. Examples include the disabled discount pass for persons with permanent disabilities, the golden bear pass for low-income individuals, the senior golden bear pass for people 62 years of age and older, the adventure pass for fourth graders and their families, the distinguished veterans pass for honorably discharged veterans who meet certain criteria, and free park admission to eligible veterans and military personnel on Veterans Day and Memorial Day.

***Federal Parks Military Pass.*** Current U.S. military members and dependents, Gold Star Families, and U.S. military veterans are eligible to receive free annual or lifetime passes, which cover entrance or standard amenity (day-use) fees at national parks, national wildlife refuges, national forests, and other federal recreational lands.

***State Park and Recreation Fund.*** The SPRF is the department's primary ongoing funding source and is mostly supported by user fees. According to the LAO, in recent years, for a variety of reasons, yearly expenditures from the SPRF have exceeded its typical level of annual revenues. During the pandemic, the General Fund provided \$114 million in one-time support to offset anticipated reductions in revenues resulting from park closures. However, this and other one-time transfers have not addressed the long-term trends affecting the solvency of the SPRF.

While increasing park access is a laudable goal, generating sufficient, long-term sources of funding for State Parks operations and maintenance has been an ongoing challenge, raising the question of how far the state should go in discounting fees. The more the state discounts fees, the more the state will need to offset lost revenues with the General Fund or cut or eliminate other improvements, services, and programs. This is particularly relevant as State Parks' large backlog of deferred maintenance is estimated at over \$1 billion. In addition, several state park properties have been devastated by recent wildfires, further reducing revenue streams as well as requiring costly repairs.

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