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# SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Monique Limón, Chair  
2025 - 2026 Regular

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<b>Bill No:</b>	AB 679	<b>Hearing Date:</b>	July 16, 2025
<b>Author:</b>	Pellerin		
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<b>Urgency:</b>	No	<b>Fiscal:</b>	Yes
<b>Consultant:</b>	Edith Hannigan		

**Subject:** Department of Parks and Recreation: Big Basin Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks

## SUMMARY

This bill would exempt the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) from using the State Public Works Board (SPWB) process to acquire land for Big Basin Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks until January 1, 2031.

## BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

**State Parks.** State Parks' mission is to provide for the health, inspiration, and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation. With 280 state park units, over 340 miles of coastline, 970 miles of lake and river frontage, 15,000 campsites, 5,200 miles of trails, 3,195 historic buildings, and more than 11,000 known prehistoric and historic archaeological sites, the department contains the largest and most diverse recreational, natural, and cultural heritage holdings of any state agency in the nation. More than 68 million people annually visit California's state park system.

**Big Basin Redwoods State Park.** Established in 1902, Big Basin Redwoods is California's oldest state park. The park is located in the heart of the Santa Cruz Mountains and hosts the largest continuous stand of ancient coast redwoods south of San Francisco. On August 18, 2020, the CZU Lightning Complex Fire swept through 97% of the park's property. The fire destroyed all historic structures and radically changed the landscape. The park now looks very different from before, but it is steadily recovering. Most of the old-growth redwood trees survived, new plant life is vigorously growing, and many animals have returned to the area. The Reimagining Big Basin project is managing the multi-year process of rebuilding park facilities and infrastructure.

**Año Nuevo State Park.** Located 55 miles south of San Francisco and 20 miles north of Santa Cruz, this park is one of the largest mainland breeding colonies in the world for the northern elephant seal. Up to 10,000 elephant seals return every year to the area to breed and give birth. The physical terrain is distinctive, with coastal terrace prairie, wetland marshes, dune fields, and coastal scrub hosting a high diversity of plants and animals, including the rare and endangered San Francisco Garter Snake and California Red-legged Frog. A Natural Preserve in the park protects the elephant seals, otters, sea lions, coyotes, cormorants, terns, and more. Nocturnal bobcats, mountain lions, foxes, weasels, bats, and black-tailed deer also occur here, and the area is situated along a major bird migratory route. Native plants and an untouched intertidal ecosystem also find shelter inside the Natural Preserve.

***Butano State Park.*** This park was created in 1957 to protect California's coast redwoods from logging. The park hosts second- and third growth-redwood trees and features 40 miles of hiking trails that wind through over 4,000 acres of canyons and uplands. Scattered throughout are patches of oak woodland, wet riparian, and sunny chaparral ecosystems. The San Mateo Resource Conservation District, in collaboration with State Parks and the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), are implementing a forest health project within the park to promote biodiversity, improve forest health, and reduce the risk of high intensity fire. The project will treat more than 400 acres using mechanical mastication, understory hand thinning, and thinning of Douglas-fir trees.

***2020 CZU Lightning Complex Fire (CZU Fire).*** Wildfires have always occurred in Santa Cruz County. Every few years, a wildfire burns from hundreds to a few thousand acres. However, the CZU Fire was extreme. The fire burned more land in Santa Cruz County than had been burned by all wildfires in the county in the previous 70 years combined. The CZU Fire began with a lightning event in the early morning of August 16, 2020, that ignited multiple fires in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. The separate fires quickly merged and rapidly spread across the North Coast and Bonny Doon areas and into the San Lorenzo Valley, leading to the evacuation of over 70,000 people. The fire was fully contained on September 22, 2020, after burning a total of 86,509 acres and destroying over 1,400 structures, 900 of which were residences. One life was lost. Monetary damages have been estimated at \$340 million, including approximately \$30 million of damage to public infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Ninety-seven percent of Big Basin burned, including the park visitors' center, lodge, staff homes, and other buildings. With the help of many partners, Big Basin partially reopened to the public on July 21, 2022.

***Reimagining Big Basin.*** State Parks initiated the Reimagining Big Basin project in summer 2021 to begin the planning process for permanent park facilities in response to the CZU fire. This process included public events and activities to solicit input from partners, stakeholders, and the community to assess priorities for rebuilding. The Reimagining Big Basin Vision (Vision) outlines a reimagined park with facilities and services located outside of the old growth redwoods and areas with sensitive resources. Alternative modes of transportation would improve access to the park, including a shuttle, which could reduce congestion and the number of cars entering the park. According to the Vision, "The CZU Lightning Complex Fire demonstrated the importance of planning at the landscape scale. ... Coordination with adjacent landowners and managers and strategic acquisitions will strengthen wildlife corridors and habitat connectivity, trail connectivity, and the diversity of recreational experiences in the region."

***Land acquisitions by the state.*** With limited exception, the Property Acquisition Law vests the SPWB with authority to acquire land and real property on behalf of state agencies. Specifically, the selection and acquisition of land or real property requires the SPWB's approval. The Department of General Services (DGS), which staffs SPWB, also plays a role, reviewing the site selection and acquisition process. Further, any contract for the acquisition of real property by the state requires the approval of the DGS Director.

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<sup>1</sup> County of Santa Cruz. July 2021. ["Local Hazard Mitigation Plan 2021–2026"](#)

***Land acquisitions for State Parks.*** The Property Acquisition Law and State Parks' authorizing statutes provide a unique process for the acquisition of land and property for the state park system. In particular, State Parks, with the consent of the Department of Finance (DOF) and subject to the Property Acquisition Law, may acquire real property for the extension, improvement, or development of the state park system. Under this process, State Parks may select and appraise property for acquisition, but the appraisal and contract for acquisition requires DGS review and approval. The SPWB is responsible for acquiring any interests in real property, which have been appraised, selected, and settled through purchase negotiations by State Parks.

***Existing law:***

- 1) Establishes the Property Acquisition Law, which, with limited exception, vests the SPWB with authority to acquire land and other real property for other state agencies. Government Code (GOV) §§15850 *et seq.*
- 2) Establishes State Parks within the California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA). Vests State Parks with control of the state park system. State Parks is responsible for administering, protecting, developing, and interpreting the state park system for the use and enjoyment of the public, protecting this system from damage, and preserving the peace. Public Resources Code (PRC) §§501, 5001, 5003, and 5008.
- 3) Authorizes State Parks, with DOF's consent and subject to the Property Acquisition Law, to acquire title to or any interest in real property, which State Parks deems necessary or proper for the extension, improvement, or development of the state park system.
  - a) Authorizes State Parks to appraise and select real property for potential acquisition of, and addition to, the state park system. Requires DGS to review and approve all appraisals conducted by State Parks before purchase negotiations commence.
  - b) Authorizes State Parks to select real property it has appraised, submit purchase offers, and negotiate a purchase agreement with the owner or owners of the property. Requires DGS to review and approve all contracts related to the acquisition of real property by State Parks. PRC §5006.
- 4) Requires State Parks to submit funding requests to administer State Park's acquisition program through the Governor's Budget for properties that the State Parks has selected and appraised. The Governor's Budget must contain a separate description of each project, or acquisition program and its appraised value, or funding allocation. PRC §5006.
- 5) Establishes notice and hearing requirements that State Parks must meet before entering into any purchase agreements for the acquisition of real property in excess of \$500,000. PRC §5006.1.

- 6) Directs the SPWB to acquire, on behalf of and for State Parks, any interests in real property, including options to purchase, which have been appraised, selected, and settled through purchase negotiations by State Parks, as specified. GOV §15853.
- 7) Authorizes State Parks to receive and accept any gift, dedication, devise, grant, or other conveyance of title to or any interest in real property, including water rights, roads, trails, rights-of-way, buildings, facilities, and other improvements, to be added to or used in connection with the state park system. PRC §5005.

### **PROPOSED LAW**

This bill would:

- 1) Exempt State Parks, when acquiring certain properties, from complying with the process to acquire land by the SPWB.
  - a) The properties exempt from this process are for Big Basin Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks.
  - b) This exemption sunsets on January 1, 2031.
- 2) Establish requirements for the acquisition of land by State Parks for Big Basin Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks.
  - a) The purchase price shall not exceed the fair market value of the property.
  - b) The fair market value shall be set forth in an appraisal that is prepared by a licensed real estate appraiser and approved by DGS.
  - c) The real property shall be appraised and an appraisal review completed before commencement of any purchasing negotiations.
  - d) All contracts related to the acquisition of real property shall be reviewed and approved by DGS.
- 3) Make findings and declarations, including the need for a special statute and that the key objectives of the bill are to streamline the process of transferring high-priority lands to State Parks to fulfill specified goals among Big Basin, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks.

### **ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT**

According to the author, “Following the devastating 2020 CZU Lightning Complex Wildfire in the Santa Cruz Mountains Region, the California Department of Parks and Recreation has partnered with various conservation organizations to evaluate land parcels near Big Basin Redwoods, Butano, and Año Nuevo State Parks for the Department to acquire. These conservation partners and State Parks have the mutual goal of transferring ownership of land parcels to the Department for long-term protection.”

“However, these partners often lack certainty that the lands they acquire will be purchased or accepted as a donation by the Department in a timely manner, leaving the partner entities in a vulnerable position, as they must continue to own and manage the lands in the meantime.”

“AB 679 will help provide certainty of timely land transfer from acquisition partners to the Department of Parks and Recreation for land parcels that State Parks agrees to

acquire. Specifically, this bill would add property acquired for Big Basin Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks, to the list of exemptions from the Public Works Board process. AB 679 will allow State Parks to work with conservation organizations more effectively in order to speed up the land acquisition process and permanently protect lands for conservation, cultural, and recreational purposes and facilitate rebuilding these parks after the CZU fires.”

## ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION

None received.

## COMMENTS

**Concerns with the SPWB process.** Concerns with the SPWB process for acquiring land for State Parks or other conservation purposes is not new. AB 2497 (Laird, Chapter 462, Statutes of 2006) directed the CNRA Secretary and the DOF Director to convene a workgroup to evaluate and develop options for improving the efficiency of state resources land acquisition transactions for those departments and conservancies subject to the SPWB’s jurisdiction.

According to an Assembly floor analysis of AB 2455 (Laird, 2008, discussed below), the resulting AB 2497 report notes that the two-step approval process of the SPWB contributes to delays and increased costs to State Parks, who appears before SPWB more than any other resource agency. The report identified several options requiring legislative action, including expanding SPWB membership, establishing a new State Parks-related acquisition board, and creating a new resources conservation board to consider all state resources land acquisitions and set statewide acquisition priorities. The workgroup did not reach consensus on the options requiring legislative action.

AB 2455 (Laird, 2008) would have authorized State Parks to acquire real property, subject to the review and approval of a proposed State Parks Preservation Board. The Governor vetoed this bill noting that the administration at the time was implementing the actions identified in the AB 2497 report that did not require legislative action and that the Legislature should give this process time to play out before considering additional legislation.

The sponsor of this bill, Sempervirens Fund, provided a recent example of how acquisitions for State Parks can get delayed through the existing process. Sempervirens Fund partnered with State Parks in May 2019 to acquire properties to eventually add to Castle Rock State Park, but the SPWB didn’t approve the acquisition until May 2023. According to the sponsor, delays occurred during this multi-year process in part due to hold-ups with the SPWB and DGS. State Parks had little to no control over this part of the land sale process and often was not kept apprised of the status of the project. State Parks had to constantly follow up with these two departments to keep things moving.

This bill would allow State Parks to acquire real property for Big Basin Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks on its own behalf instead of through the SPWB acquisition process.

**Consistent Public Process.** While there can be delays in the SPWB process, it is worth noting that there are many reasons for these delays, including factors that are not within SPWB’s control. For example, incomplete applications or applications that do not

meet certain standards, for an appraisal for example, would slow the process. It is worth noting that the Legislature established the Property Acquisition Law to create uniformity in the state's land acquisition process, provide checks on individual state agencies, and incorporate multiple layers of review and due diligence to ensure the state's acquisition of lands is responsible. The Property Acquisition Law also includes a public process in these proceedings, providing a forum for the public to weigh in and comment on potential acquisitions. Finally, the Property Acquisition Law already provides some streamlining for State Parks compared to other state agencies by creating a process that is unique to State Parks.

That said, the Legislature has found it necessary to exempt some state agencies from the SPWB's process, including the Department of Water Resources (DWR), the Central Valley Flood Protection Board, the Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), and the Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB), as well as the State Lands Commission and the State Coastal Conservancy in certain instances. WCB may authorize acquisition of real property and authorize CDFW to acquire property. Before authorizing the purchase of any land, however, WCB must notify all the adjoining landowners of the property proposed for acquisition and include an explanation of the proposed use of the land. Other agencies exempt from the SPWB's process make decisions at open meetings noticed to the public at least ten days in advance. Also, the purchase price for the property cannot exceed the fair market value of the property, which must be established by a licensed appraiser and approved by DGS.

This bill includes requirements regarding the purchase price of any properties proposed for acquisition by State Parks (e.g. that it cannot exceed fair market value), and that a licensed appraiser must prepare the appraisal, which DGS must approve. The bill does not include, however, any requirements for public notice or opportunities for public comment.

**Addressing Governor's Veto.** This proposal was previously heard in this Committee in 2024 (AB 2103, Pellerin) and at the time the bill came to this Committee it did not include requirements for public notice or comment. The Committee added a requirement for State Parks to notify the city or county, the budget and policy Committees of the Legislature, and members of the Legislature representing the area proposed for acquisition; for State Parks to hold a public hearing where the public could comment on the proposed acquisition; and require State Parks to provide an opportunity for the public to comment in writing on the proposed acquisition.

The Senate Appropriations analysis of AB 2103 discussed the following fiscal impacts of those public meeting requirements, communicated by State Parks:

*Ongoing costs until January 1, 2030, likely in the upper tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars annually (General Fund), for State Parks to meet the requirements of this bill to fee title or any lesser right or interest in real property, as specified. State Parks estimates costs of \$12,000 per day to hold public meetings, which includes travel and overnight accommodations for State Parks personnel as well as streaming services to allow for remote public participation and comment. Therefore, holding public meetings for 5 or more days would result in costs exceeding the Suspense threshold.*

The Senate Appropriations Committee amended the bill to, instead of requiring State Parks to hold a public meeting, allow a City Council, Board of Supervisors, or Member of the Legislature to request a public meeting from State Parks.

Despite these amendments to lower the fiscal impact of the bill, Governor Newsom vetoed it. In his veto message, he wrote, “While the intent of this bill is to streamline [State Parks’s] acquisition process for park units impacted by the CZU Lightning Fire Complex, its public hearing requirements may slow the acquisition process and would significantly increase [State Parks’s] costs. [...] It is important to remain disciplined when considering bills with significant fiscal implications that are not included in the budget, such as this measure.”

The Committee may wish to consider amendments to address the co-existing issues of public transparency and fiscal impact and making findings regarding transparency. **[See AMENDMENTS #1 and 2]**

***Finding a middle ground between transparency and fiscal impact.*** With this proposal again in front of the Committee without a public meeting, the Committee coordinated with the bill’s sponsors, author’s office, and State Parks to find a pathway that notifies the public of pending land acquisitions under this bill while also minimizing costs to State Parks.

Key to this compromise is allowing State Parks to co-locate the opportunity to comment on a land acquisition at a pre-planned meeting that might have other items on the agenda. So long as adjacent landowners to the parcel to be acquired are notified, and the parcel to be acquired is clearly described in the meeting notice, State Parks may utilize existing resources to fulfill the requirements of the Committee amendments.

### **Related legislation.**

SB 630 (Allen, 2025) exempts State Parks from the SPWB process for certain land acquisitions statewide. This bill is being heard in the Assembly Water, Parks, and Wildlife Committee on July 15, 2025.

AB 2103 (Pellerin, 2024) would have exempted State Parks from the SPWB process for land acquisitions related to Big Basin Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks. This bill was vetoed.

AB 566 (Pellerin, 2023) would have authorized State Parks to enter into an agreement with an eligible entity to permanently protect lands in or for the state park system and to acquire land on its own behalf. This bill failed to meet the House of Origin deadline.

SB 1167 (Allen, 2022) would have exempted acquisitions of land or other real property for the state park system from the requirement that the SPWB acquire the land if certain conditions were met, including that State Parks had determined that the land or property would not require additional state resource to manage, among others. This bill was not heard in Assembly Water, Parks, and Wildlife Committee.

AB 727 (Maze, 2007) would have removed the authority of DWR and WCB to acquire land or real property without the SPWB and removed DWR’s authority to use the power

of eminent domain. This bill failed to pass the Assembly Business and Professions Committee.

AB 2455 (Laird, 2008) would have authorized State Parks to acquire real property, subject to the review and approval of a proposed State Parks Preservation Board. The Governor vetoed this bill.

AB 2497 (Laird, Chapter 462, Statutes of 2006) required the CNRA Secretary and DOF Director to jointly convene a workgroup to evaluate and develop options for improving the efficiency of state resource land acquisition transactions for those departments and conservancies subject to the jurisdiction of the SPWB.

## SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS

### AMENDMENT 1

**SEC. 3.** Section 15853.1 is added to the Government Code, to read:

**15853.1.** (a) For the acquisition of fee title or any lesser right or interest in real property by the Department of Parks and Recreation with respect to property acquired for Big Basin Redwoods, Año Nuevo, and Butano State Parks pursuant to subdivision (c) of Section 15853, all of the following apply:

[...]

(5) (A) The Department of Parks and Recreation shall provide written notice to the county board of supervisors of the county in which the land is located, of the intent to acquire real property pursuant to this section.

(B) (i) No fewer than 30 days before the close of escrow regarding the acquisition of real property pursuant to this section, the Department of Parks and Recreation shall hold a public meeting where members of the public may make comments on a specific transaction or transactions regarding the contracted acquisition of real property by the Department of Parks and Recreation pursuant to this section.

(ii) The meeting held pursuant to clause (i) may occur through teleconference.

(iii) The meeting held pursuant to clause (i) may occur at an otherwise planned public meeting of the Department of Parks and Recreation.

(C) (i) No fewer than 15 days before the meeting described in clause (i) of subparagraph (B) is held, the Department of Parks and Recreation shall notify the public of the meeting by posting in a conspicuous location on the Department of Parks and

Recreation's internet website and notifying, by mail or use of the Department of Parks and Recreation's distribution lists, as appropriate, all owners of record of adjacent parcels of land.

(ii) The Department of Parks and Recreation shall make a good faith effort to locate current contact information for all adjacent landowners displaced due to the 2020 CZU Lightning Complex Fire.

(iii) The Department of Parks and Recreation may consult with the relevant county agencies or officials to locate contact information for landowners described in clause (ii).

(D) All meeting notices provided pursuant to subparagraph (C) shall clearly state both of the following:

(i) The specific real property transaction on which members of the public may make comments at the meeting held pursuant to clause (i) of subparagraph (B).



(ii) An explanation of the proposed use of the land to be acquired by the Department of Parks and Recreation.  
[...]

**AMENDMENT 2**

**SECTION 1.** The Legislature finds and declares all of the following:

[...]

(e) It is the public policy of this state that public agencies exist to aid in the conduct of the people's business and the proceedings of public agencies be conducted openly so that the public may remain informed. The transfer of land from private to public property is a matter of public interest and warrants public disclosure prior to the closure of the transaction when appropriate.

(f) The key objectives of this act are to streamline the process of transferring high-priority lands to the Department of Parks and Recreation to fulfill the goals of enhanced visitor services, improved park operations, strengthened habitat connectivity, and enhanced climate resilience among Big Basin Redwoods, Butano, and Año Nuevo State Parks.

**SUPPORT**

Sempervirens Fund (sponsor)  
California State Parks Foundation  
Land Trust of Santa Cruz County  
Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District  
Save the Redwoods League

**OPPOSITION**

None Received

-- END --