

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

**ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 55 (Umberg) – As Amended March 26, 2025

Policy Committee:	Water, Parks and Wildlife	Vote:	10 - 0
	Military and Veterans Affairs		8 - 0

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

**SUMMARY:**

This bill requires the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks), upon presentation of proof, to issue a pass to an “eligible Gold Star Family member,” as defined, entitling the bearer to the use of all facilities, including boat launching facilities, in units of the state park system. The bill requires State Parks to adopt regulations, as necessary, to implement the bill.

**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 \$107,000 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 eligible pass-holders to free camping and boat launching benefits that the department contends will be fairly popular and require eligibility validation.
- 2) State Parks estimates this bill could result in increased park visitation with annual General Fund costs of roughly \$3.5 million to support additional staffing and increased operations and maintenance (O&M) needs and capital improvements at state park units. State Parks notes its estimate is based on the increased O&M costs associated with the California State Library Parks Pass, which offers vehicle day-use entry to over 200 participating state park units to library card holders. This bill offers pass-holders access to a greater universe of state park facilities.
- 3) Forgone annual revenue of an unknown amount (State Parks and Recreation Fund (SPRF)) resulting from free use of all facilities in units of the state park system that would otherwise require payment of fees from park and park facility users. This committee is unable to verify the number of eligible Gold Star Family members in the state.

According to a February 2024 Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) report, the LAO projects the SPRF will face an annual gap of approximately \$15 million between its estimated revenues and projected expenditures in each of the next few years. This structural deficit would cause SPRF to become insolvent by fiscal year (FY) 2028-29. See below for more details.

**COMMENTS:**

1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

Currently, California law offers free state park access to certain veterans, and the federal government extends similar benefits to Gold Star Families for national parks and public lands. However, our state has yet to extend this recognition at the state level. By passing [this bill], we align California with several other states that already provide this benefit, ensuring that Gold Star Families have access to outdoor spaces that can offer healing, reflection, and recreation.

2) **Background. Gold Star Families.** A Gold Star Family is next of kin of a member of the U.S. Armed Forces who lost their life in a “qualifying situation,” such as a war, an international terrorist attack, or a military operation outside of the U.S. while serving with the U.S. Armed Forces. According to the Gold Star Family Registry, which is “the first comprehensive database of the United States’ fallen Heroes,” since World War II, 32,448 California residents have lost their lives in the line of duty. Since not all Gold Star Family members are residents of the same state as their deceased loved ones, it is unclear how many California residents would qualify for free park access under this bill.

The California Department of Veterans Affairs authorizes the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to issue Gold Star Family specialized license plates for vehicles owned by eligible Gold Star Family members. According to the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee’s analysis of this bill, as of February 4, 2025, the DMV had issued 636 Gold Star Family license plates. This may be the closest proxy for the number of Gold Star Family members that might be interested in accessing parks under the pass this bill establishes. Additionally, the popularity of the distinguished veterans pass (see below) has been increasing over the last few years with 7,146 issued in 2024.

The National Park Service offers a free lifetime Military Pass to Gold Star Families and U.S. military veterans and a free annual Military Pass to 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.

This bill is sponsored by the organization Sons and Daughters in Touch (representing Gold Star children from the Vietnam War), which argues that individuals utilizing free park admission are likely to spend money on additional and ancillary services once they’re in the park – potentially offsetting foregone fee revenue for State Parks.

**Other Discounted Passes.** In addition to the aforementioned library parks pass (which most recently received \$6.75 million General Fund in the FY 2025-26 budget), State Parks offers several other 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.

**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.

The Department of Finance is opposed to this bill, stating "Notwithstanding the merits of this bill and alignment with the Administration's Outdoors for All initiative, this bill creates significant ongoing General Fund pressures."

- 3) **Prior Legislation.** AB 308 (Alanis), of the 2023-24 Legislative Session, was substantially similar to this bill. AB 308 was held on this committee's suspense file.

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