Date of Hearing: April 9, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
Matt Haney, Chair
AB 518 (Ward) – As Introduced February 10, 2025

SUBJECT: Low-impact camping areas

SUMMARY: Exempts a "low-impact camping area," as defined, from the Special Occupancy Parks Act (SOPA) if it is located in a county that has enacted an ordinance authorizing low-impact camping that meets specified requirements. Specifically, **this bill**:

1) Exempts a low-impact camping area from the definition of "special occupancy park" within SOPA if it meets specified requirements and is located in a county that has enacted an ordinance, subject to the requirements of existing law, authorizing low-impact camping.

2) Defines "low-impact camping area" to mean any area of private property that provides for the transient occupancy rental of a temporary sleeping accommodation for recreational purposes that is not a commercial lodging facility.

3) Provides that a low-impact camping area is not a special occupancy park if it is located in a county that has enacted an ordinance, subject to the requirements of existing law, authorizing low-impact camping and meets all of the following requirements:

    a) Provides for the transient occupancy rental of a temporary sleeping accommodation, not exceeding 14 consecutive nights per camper and 28 nights per calendar year per camper;

    b) Has no more than nine temporary sleeping accommodations;

    c) Does not include a temporary sleeping accommodation that is rented out for permanent human occupancy;

    d) Prohibits onstreet parking;

    e) Complies with applicable state and local fire safety requirements;

    f) Complies with applicable state and local tax requirements, including, but not limited to, the payment of local transient occupancy taxes;

    g) Complies with applicable local requirements for disposal of human waste, or in the absence of applicable local requirements, maintains sanitation facilities that are fully self-contained or connected to a permitted sewage disposal system serving the property;

    h) Complies with applicable local requirements for the disposal of trash, or in the absence of applicable local requirements, requires all solid waste to be removed from the premises after each occupancy and onsite trash receptacles to abide by applicable animal-protection trash best practices or requirements;

i) Complies with applicable local requirements for quiet hours, or in the absence of such requirements, enforces quiet hours from 10pm to 6am;

j) Complies with applicable local requirements relating to low-impact campsites, low-incident camping, or incidental camping, including, but not limited to, local zoning, permit, lot size, and setback requirements;

k) Designates an operator or property manager who is available by phone 24 hours a day, seven days a week;

l) Allows no more than one temporary sleeping accommodation per acre and is located on a parcel of two acres or more;

m) Requires all temporary sleeping accommodations to be located no less than 200 feet from any offsite residence and no less than 30 feet from any adjoining property or road;

n) Is not located on an urban infill site, as defined; and

o) Has not been used as a special occupancy park for the last five years unless the area was a special occupancy park before January 1, 2024 and the area met the requirements of this definition on January 1, 2023.

4) Requires a county that has authorized low-impact camping to do all of the following:

a) Establish a registry of low-impact camping areas which may include, but is not limited to, the number of operators authorized in the county, a site address of such areas, the number of lots and types of temporary sleeping accommodations, the facility owner and operator names, the date a low-impact camping area is established, summaries of all code enforcement investigations associated with low-impact camping areas, amendments to this information, and any other relevant information deemed appropriate by the county;

b) Establish a complaint program to support code enforcement related to low-impact camping areas; and

c) Require all low-impact camping owners or operators to post, in a conspicuous location, contact information for the county for complaints or information related to low-impact camping areas.

5) Requires a county that has authorized low-impact camping to have administrative and enforcement authority over the provisions of this bill.

6) Defines “commercial lodging facility” to have the same meaning as the term “hotel,” as specified.

7) Defines “recreational vehicle” to mean either a motor home, travel trailer, truck camper, or camping trailer, with or without motive power, designed for human habitation for recreational, emergency, or other occupancy, that meets specified criteria; or a park trailer, as specified.

8) Defines "temporary sleeping accommodation" to include, but not be limited to, a tent, yurt, or recreational vehicle.

9) Provides that this bill does not authorize an individual to access private property without the permission of the landowner.

10) Provides that this bill does not require a county to authorize low-impact camping, and specifies that this bill establishes minimum requirements for a county that, by ordinance, elects to authorize low-impact camping.

EXISTING LAW:

1) Defines "special occupancy park" as a recreational vehicle park, temporary recreational vehicle park, incidental camping area, or tent camp. (Health and Safety Code (HSC) Section 18862.43)

2) Defines "recreational vehicle (RV) park" as any area or tract of land, or a separate designated section within a mobilehome park where two or more lots are rented, leased, or held out for rent or lease, or were formerly held out for rent or lease and later converted to a subdivision, cooperative, condominium, or other form of resident ownership, to accommodate owners or users of recreational vehicles, camping cabins, or tents. (HSC 18862.39)

3) Defines "temporary recreational vehicle park" as any area or tract of land where two or more lots are rented, leased, or held out for rent or lease to owners or users of recreational vehicles and that is established for one operation not to exceed 11 consecutive days, and is then removed. (HSC 18862.47)

4) Defines "incidental camping area" as any area or tract of land where camping is incidental to the primary use of the land for agriculture, timber management, or water or power development purposes, and where two or more campsites used for camping are rented or leased or held out for rent or lease. The density of usage shall not exceed 25 camping parties within a radius of 265 feet from any campsite within the incidental camping area. (HSC 18862.19)

5) Defines "tent" as any enclosed structure or shelter fabricated entirely or in major part of cloth, canvas, or similar material supported by a frame. (HSC 18862.49)

6) Establishes requirements for the construction, maintenance, occupancy, use, and design of special occupancy parks and creates the Special Occupancy Parks Revolving Fund through SOPA. (HSC 18860 et seq.)

7) Gives the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) authority over special occupancy and RV parks. (HSC 18865)

FISCAL EFFECT: None.

COMMENTS:

Author's Statement: According to the author, "AB 518, the Low Impact Camping Areas Act of 2025, is a transformative step toward expanding outdoor recreation opportunities while fostering rural economic growth and land conservation. By streamlining the permitting process for small, low-impact camping areas (LICAs), this bill will alleviate the strain on overcrowded state and national parks, making outdoor experiences more accessible and affordable for millions of Californians. As demand for outdoor recreation continues to surge, AB 518 ensures that more people can enjoy nature while supporting sustainable land use.

Beyond enhancing recreational access, AB 518 provides much-needed economic relief for farmers, ranchers, and rural landowners facing rising costs of land ownership. By allowing them to generate supplemental income through small-scale, environmentally responsible camping, the bill promotes land retention and conservation, preventing unnecessary development. With clear local oversight and regulations in place, LICAs will strike a balance between expanding public access to nature and preserving California's rural landscapes. AB 518 is an investment in both outdoor equity and the sustainability of the state's natural resources."

Special Occupancy Parks Act*:* HCD has authority over mobilehome and special occupancy parks. Both mobilehome parks and RV parks must meet minimum health and safety standards and are subject to regular inspections. California has a number of state laws covering recreational vehicle parks, including requirements outlined in SOPA. RV parks are required to comply with legally distinct requirements related to permitting, operator responsibilities, and fees. Some of these requirements include toilet, shower, and lavatory provisions; domestic animal limitations; lighting installations; and lot line registrations. Local governments retain siting and land use authority as part of their police powers.

Local agencies may assume special occupancy park authority in place of HCD. In order to do that, local enforcement agencies or a local building or health department must satisfy certain criteria, including:

- Providing prompt and effective recovery assistance or services during or immediately following a disaster;
- Authorization from a local governing body that has jurisdiction over the local building or health department; and
- Possessing the knowledge and expertise to administer the inspection responsibilities.

HCD can limit local enforcement authority to specific areas or parks, and the local enforcement agency can charge fees or be reimbursed by HCD. HCD must also post a description and send annual electronic notices that explain the process for local agencies to assume enforcement authority. A significant number of local agencies representing districts with special occupancy parks gave back enforcement authority to HCD in recent years, citing lack of capacity and/or other limitations after receiving these notices. By exempting low-impact camping sites from SOPA, this bill removes these sites from HCD jurisdiction in counties that have authorized low-impact camping via ordinance and that meet the standards in the bill, essentially returning these sites to local-only oversight.

Low-Impact Camping Areas*:* This bill defines low-impact camping areas as any area of private property that provides for the transient occupancy rental of a temporary sleeping accommodation

for recreational purposes that meets specified criteria. Low-impact camping areas are small-scale (nine or fewer sites), short-term (no more than 14 consecutive days and 28 days per year per camper), recreational, private campgrounds – typically imagined as open areas on private, rural properties that can support a handful of tents, RVs, yurts, or the like.

These small, private camping areas are regulated as special occupancy parks under existing law and also have to comply with any local land use and planning requirements. For these small-scale operators, the author and sponsors contend that some of the minimum requirements under SOPA may be cost-prohibitive and unnecessary. This bill would establish a minimum framework for counties who wish to formally authorize low-impact camping within their borders and in counties that adopt such an ordinance, the bill would remove these sites from SOPA and instead subject them to various requirements enumerated in the bill. The author and sponsor argue this would provide an opportunity to increase affordable access to the outdoors, help develop rural economies, and diversify and supplement incomes for rural landowners.

Arguments in Support: According to Hipcamp, the bill's sponsor, "Camping areas in California are currently subject to two levels of regulation: local and state. This means that to host even a few campers in California, a landowner needs to obtain both a permit or permission from local government and a costly and time-intensive state permit. Local governments traditionally manage land use in their communities and are best suited to decide if, how, where, and to what standards small-scale camping in their communities should be allowed. But due to antiquated language in the Special Occupancy Parks Act, originally written to manage mobile home park developments, landowners looking to welcome small-scale outdoor recreation on their properties need to get approval from both their local government and via the California Department of Housing and Community Development. This process can take over a year and cost tens of thousands of dollars. It also includes standards that, while appropriate for mobile home and RV parks, are less suited to a small number of campsites on an open landscape, working farm, or other rural property. AB 518 defines a new category of camping known as 'low-impact camping areas' (LICAs). Eligible LICAs are still required to obtain all applicable local permissions, but would no longer be required to also obtain the costly and time-intensive secondary state permit if they live in a county or municipality that opts into AB 518's allowances."

Arguments in Opposition: According to the California Outdoor Hospitality Association (CalOHA), "AB 518 now gives local jurisdictions the same ability to regulate nine and under low impact campgrounds and while the measure ensures that local governments must have a regulatory framework in place in order to comply with local building codes, safety standards, sewage and water requirements, along with enforcement responsibilities, we believe that it still presents problems that must be addressed. […] CalOHA believes that RVs should be stricken from the bill and that it should only apply to soft-sided structures. The bill allows for a 14-day length of stay but a large capacity blackwater holding tank in an RV would only provide about seven days of use if used conservatively. […] In terms of HCD, what are the issues that are causing these properties from being able to comply with SOPA? CalOHA believes that all parks, regardless of size, should be regulated by HCD through SOPA, even if we don't always agree with the stringent safety demands placed upon park developers and operators by HCD."

Committee Amendments: In order to provide confidence to camp visitors that they are utilizing a low-impact campsite that is properly authorized and permitted under a local ordinance, and for ease of identification in cases of code enforcement inspections, of the committee may wish to

amend Section 2 of the bill as follows to require a site owner or operator to post their local permit or registration information at the site, if the county requires it to operate:

HSC 18890. (c) A county that has authorized low-impact camping shall do the following:

(1) Establish a registry of low-impact camping areas which may include, but not be limited to, the number or operators authorized in the county, a site address of such areas, the number of lots and types of temporary sleeping accommodations, the facility owner and operator names, the date a low-impact camping area is established, summaries of all code enforcement investigations associated with low-impact camping areas, amendments to this information, and any other relevant information deemed appropriate by the county.

(2) Establish a complaint program to support code enforcement related to low-impact camping areas.

(3) Require all low-impact camping owners or operators to post, in a conspicuous location, ***any permit or registration required by the county to operate the low-impact camping area,*** and contact information for the county for complaints or information related to low-impact camping areas.

Related Legislation:

SB 620 (McGuire) of 2024 was substantially similar to this bill and also included a new tourism assessment framework. That bill died pending a vote on the Assembly Floor.

SB 1307 (Rubio), Chapter 669, Statutes of 2022: Required HCD to post an explanation of the process for a city, county, or city and county to assume the enforcement responsibilities pursuant to SOPA, and made other changes to permitting and enforcement timelines.

SB 325 (O'Connell), Chapter 434, Statutes of 2001: Established SOPA under the jurisdiction and enforcement of HCD and local enforcement agencies.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Hipcamp (Sponsor)
Audubon California
Bay Area Ridge Trail Council
Black Surfers Collective
California Association for Local Economic Development (CALED)
California Certified Organic Farmers
California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF)
California Farm Bureau
California Farm Bureau Federation
California Outdoor Recreation Partnership
California Outdoors Recreation Partnership (CORP)
California Trails Foundation
City Surf Project
Coloma Lotus Whitewater

County of Mendocino
El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce
El Dorado County Farm Bureau
El Dorado County Farm Trails
Great Redwood Trail Agency
Inyo County Clerk/recorder
Latino Outdoors
Little Kamper LP
Nemo Equipment
Outdoor Afro
Outdoor Industry Association (OIA)
Outdoor Outreach
Pathloom
REI
Salted Roots
Save the Redwoods League
Supervisor Hardy Bullock, Nevada County
Tahoe Mountain Sports
The San Diego Mountain Biking Association
Top Rope Media
Trust for Public Land

Opposition

California Outdoor Hospitality Association
County of Santa Cruz
County of Siskiyou
County of Solano
Rural Bonny Doon Association

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