



August 21, 2025

Honorable Anna Caballero
Chair, Senate Housing Committee
1021 O Street, Suite 7620
Sacramento, CA 95814

Honorable Kelly Seyarto
Vice-Chair, Senate Housing Committee
1021 O Street, Suite 7120
Sacramento CA 95814

Re: AB 518 (Ward): Low-impact camping areas – SUPPORT

Dear Chair Caballero, Vice Chair Seyarto, and Committee Members:

Assembly Bill 518 is critical to expanding access to the outdoors across California, supporting rural tourism economies, and diversifying income for farmers and ranchers. By creating a new framework for camping known as "low-impact camping areas" at the state level, AB 518 cuts through red tape and returns land use decisions regarding small-scale campground permitting to local governments who opt in.

Outdoor recreation hit a record high in past years with more than 20 million Californians getting outside annually, representing \$81.5 billion in value added to the California economy in 2023. But nearly half of all campers report difficulty finding available campsites. There are too few outdoor recreation accommodations for Californians and visitors, and this bottleneck is having negative impacts on outdoor access, rural economies, and recreation businesses. With reports that nearly 4,000 public lands campsites could close across California due to federal budget cuts, local communities need as many tools in their toolbox to manage demand for camping and support their outdoor recreation economies.

AB 518 addresses these issues by removing unnecessary and expensive state barriers to campsite permitting, giving local governments the chance to opt into creating options for rural and agricultural landowners to host low-impact recreation on their properties.

Low-impact camping harnesses the financial power of outdoor recreation to create sustainable revenue for farmers, rural landowners, and small businesses while supporting the conservation of valuable undeveloped landscapes. For these reasons, we urge you to vote YES on AB 518.

Sincerely,



Alyssa Ravasio, Founder and CEO
Hipcamp, Inc

Pam Hill, President
Apple Hill Growers Association

Mike Lynes, Director of Public Policy
Audubon California

Bill Gamber, Owner
Big Agnes Inc.

Shannon Hughes, Owner
Bigfoot Flat

Kayiita Johansson, Founder
Black Surfers Collective

Laetitia Benador, Policy Manager

California Certified Organic Farmers

Steven Fenaroli, Director of Policy Advocacy
California Farm Bureau Federation

Lexie Gritlefeld, Executive Director
California Outdoor Recreation Partnership

Stephanie Stephens, Executive Director
California Parks and Recreation Professionals

Jake Bayless, Board President
California Trails Foundation

Johnny Irwin, Executive Director
City Surf Project

Adam Anderson, Owner
Coloma Lotus Whitewater

Evan Wiig, Director of Membership and Communications
Community Alliance with Family Farmers

Steve Messer, President
Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association

Laurel Brent-Bumb, CEO
El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce

Gordon Helm, Director
El Dorado County Farm Bureau

Mike Owen, President
El Dorado County Farm Trails

Michael Kahn, Founder
Explore Local Nature

Elaine Hogan, Executive Director
Great Redwood Trail Agency

Jazzari Taylor, Policy Advocate
Latino Outdoors

Josh Simpson, Co-Founder
Little Kamper LP

John Wentworth, CEO
Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access Foundation

Kim Suarez, Raw Materials Specialist
Marmot

Hannah Wintucky, Government Affairs Manager
Outdoor Industry Association

Rue Mapp, Executive Director and Founder
Outdoor Afro

Ben McCue, Executive Director
Outdoor Outreach

Ankit Jain, CEO
Pathloom, Inc.

Iman Sylvain, Western Regional Director
Rails to Trails Conservancy

Matt Oesterle, Founder and CEO
Ramble

Alicia Jarvie, Head of Community and Government Affairs
REI Co-op

Drew Saunders, General Manager
Salewa

Adriana Guerrero-Nardone, Executive Director
Salted Roots

Susie Murphy, Executive Director
San Diego Mountain Biking Association

Sam Hodder, President and CEO
Save the Redwoods League

Laura Lasseter, Director of Operations
Southern Humboldt Business & Visitors Bureau

David Polivy, CEO
Tahoe Mountain Sports

Meredith Caccese McConvill, Founder
Top Rope Media

Rico Mastrodonato, Legislative and Policy Director
Trust for Public Land

Elliot Gault, Senior Manager, Government Affairs
VF Corporation

Irene Davis
Visit San Benito

Shannon Hughes, President of the Board
Willow Creek Chamber of Commerce



CA Assembly Bill 518 - Low Impact Camping Areas Act

Author - California State Assembly Member Chris Ward

Passed Senate Housing Committee 9-0 (July 15, 2025)

Passed Assembly Floor 63-0 (May 12, 2025)

Passed Assembly Housing Committee 10-1 (April 9, 2025)

California needs more campsites to help families get outside.

Outdoor recreation hit a record high in 2022 with more than 19 million Californians getting outside. California's outdoor recreation economy - one of the largest economic drivers in the state - is worth an estimated \$81.5 billion. However, over half of all campers report difficulty finding or booking available campsites, up from only 10% in 2019. Millions of Californians also struggle with the high cost of booking overnight accommodations, especially in heavily touristed areas. Assembly Bill 518 would create more opportunities for camping by establishing a framework to support well-managed private campsites and returning local control over this land use to local government. In turn, AB 518 will increase access to the outdoors and support sustainable tourism and economic development statewide.

What problems does Assembly Bill 518 address?

CA state law currently states that camping areas of any type with two or more campsites need a permit to operate through the CA Department of Community and Housing Development (HCD) **in addition to** a local land-use permit offered by the county or municipal government. The law that governs campgrounds - the Special Occupancy Parks Act (SOPA) - was designed specifically to regulate and permit large commercial campgrounds, RV parks, and mobile home developments – not small, low-impact campsites on a farm, ranch, or rural private land. The infrastructure development requirements within the HCD permit can take years to comply with and cost tens of thousands of dollars in construction and permitting costs, which means that landowners who want to offer limited camping on their properties - even those who get approved at the local level - are effectively priced out of doing so.

AB 518 creates a new category of camping in SOPA for “low impact camping areas” (LICAs) and introduces a new framework for this type of land use that differentiates it from large-scale commercial campgrounds. If camping areas can meet this new definition of “low impact camping areas,” **and exist within a county that**

authorizes low impact camping, they would then **only need the required local permits** and be exempted from additional HCD permitting. The benefits of this differentiation in the code are as follows:

- Affirm local control over land use decisions and low-impact camping on private lands. Land use is primarily a local issue – municipal and county governments know where and how to offer this type of camping safely if they want to do so. **AB 518 does not supersede local regulations** by allowing or requiring any LICAs without local approval. Should AB 518 become law, local governments do not have to allow LICAs in their area even if they meet the state definition laid out in AB 518. Rather, local governments would have to **opt into the state exemption** and update their land use codes to govern LICAs as they see fit should they choose to do so.
- Reduce barriers to entry for landowners interested in offering low-impact camping on their properties. As long as they are approved by their local government, landowners would not need to pursue an expensive and time-intensive state permit.
- Support rural economies, agritourism, and agricultural landscapes by creating new revenue streams for rural landowners, farmers, and ranchers.
- Support the state’s goals of providing affordable access to the outdoors and conserving private land. This includes Priority 1.10 in California’s “Outdoors for All” Strategy that calls on the state to partner with local governments and landowners to create low-impact camping regulations.

What would “low impact camping areas” (LICAs) look like?

To qualify as a LICA under AB 518 a camping area must meet all of the following criteria and have local authority to operate from a county that opts-into the state exemption:

- Maximum number of sites: 9 or fewer campsites total per property
- Acreage minimum: 2 acres
- Density limits: 1 campsite/acre
- Parking: no on-street parking allowed
- Zoning requirements: property is not within an urban or suburban area
- Hosted: a property manager or operator must be available 24/7
- Health and safety: complies with all local regulations, including those that cover the disposal of trash, human waste, fire safety, and noise management
- Rented for no more than 14 consecutive nights per camper and not exceeding 28 nights per calendar year per camper

Frequently asked questions

Would Assembly Bill 518 change the regulatory burden for local governments?

No. AB 518 does not supersede or require local governments to allow camping in their communities. Instead, AB 518 creates an opportunity for interested local governments to opt-in and create their own regulations for LICAs in their jurisdiction using state language as the baseline. Moreover, the bill requires that counties opting-into

LICA permitting must require digital marketplaces to include any permit or registration numbers associated with the LICA on the online listing in an effort to support local enforcement efforts.

Do counties have the capacity to manage a potential increase in enforcement issues?

Assembly Bill 518 includes an opt-in clause clarifying that counties may adopt their own LICA-related legislation if they so choose. Those counties will then be responsible for enforcement of LICAs in their jurisdiction. However, in 2024 HCD confirmed that they have received just two complaints regarding LICAs in the last six years – any other complaints regarding noise, neighbor issues, etc. are already handled by local code enforcement agencies and will continue to be handled by them. Nevertheless, an amendment to the bill that requires digital marketplaces to provide a spot on listing pages for local permit or registration numbers from county governments should assist with enforcement as well.

Does AB 518 have any impact on Transient Occupancy Taxes at the local level?

No. AB 518 does not impact how a local government wants to collect tourism taxes. In fact, AB 518 makes it much easier for local governments to update land use codes to allow for LICA-style camping and therefore require and collect taxes on this new and expanded land use.

Low-impact camping is compatible with responsible fire management:

California's Joint Strategy for Sustainable Outdoor Recreation and Wildfire Resilience makes it clear that the state cannot afford to halt outdoor recreation in the face of a changing climate and longer fire season. Instead, the strategy recommends diversifying recreation opportunities to ensure families can continue to get outside while supporting rural economies. Camping on private land is a fire-safe activity and no more risky than short-term rental guests or a residential property owner having access to a backyard bbq or fire pit. In a public comment in June 2024, Ken Pimlott, former director of CAL FIRE, stated "fire safety requirements on private lands do not need to be unique or prohibitive to ensure that safety is the end result."

According to the National Fire Protection Association, campfires are one of the least common ignition sources of wildfires in the U.S. Hipcamp, the largest booking platform for camping globally, also reports that between 2014-2024 their campers spent 1.7 million nights outside in California without ever seeing a guest campfire cause a fire emergency.

Should RVs be allowed to stay at low-impact camping areas?

Yes. RV usage is rapidly increasing, particularly among families, first-time campers, communities of color, and retirees. According to the 2025 KOA report, 33% of new campers chose glamping—including RV stays—while tent use continues to decline nationwide. RVs provide a safe, self-contained, and low-impact entry point to nature for a broad and diverse range of Californians. Similarly, for landowners, hosting RVs requires minimal infrastructure investment, making it an accessible way for farmers, ranchers, and rural landowners to generate supplemental income to conserve their properties and agricultural operations.

To ensure the responsible management of RVs, AB 518 includes a recent amendment that limits property owners to hosting no more than 4 RVs (of the 9 maximum campsites) concurrently within their low-impact camping area.

Supporter List: The following organizations have formally endorsed Assembly Bill 518

Conservation and recreation advocates:

- Audubon California
- Bay Area Ridge Trail Council
- California Parks and Recreation Society
- California Trails Foundation
- Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association
- Great Redwood Trail Agency
- The Mammoth Lakes Trails & Public Access Foundation
- Rails to Trails Conservancy
- San Diego Mountain Biking Association
- Save the Redwoods League
- Trust for Public Land

Outdoor equity and access:

- Black Surfers Collective
- City Surf Project
- Explore Local Nature
- Founded Outdoors
- Latino Outdoors
- Outdoor Afro
- Outdoor Outreach
- Salted Roots
- Surf Justice Collective

Outdoor industry and retailers:

- Big Agnes, Inc.
- California Outdoor Recreation Partnership
- Coloma Lotus Whitewater
- Outdoor Industry Association
- Hipcamp, Inc.
- Little Kamper LP
- Marmot
- NEMO Equipment, Inc
- Pathloom, Inc.

- REI Co-op
- Ramble
- Salewa
- Top Rope Media
- Tahoe Mountain Sports
- VF Corporation

Agriculture and rural economies:

- Apple Hill Growers Association
- California Association for Local Economic Development
- California Farm Bureau Federation
- California Certified Organic Farmers
- Community Alliance with Family Farmers
- El Dorado County Farm Bureau
- El Dorado County Farm Trails
- El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce
- Southern Humboldt Business and Visitors Bureau
- Visit San Benito County
- Willow Creek Chamber of Commerce

Local governments:

- Inyo County Board of Supervisors
- Mendocino County Board of Supervisors
- Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
- San Benito County Board of Supervisors
- Steve Madrone, Fifth District Supervisor, Humboldt County
- Hardy Bullock, Fifth District Supervisor, Nevada County
- John Peschong, First District Supervisor, San Luis Obispo County
- Anaiah Kirk, Third District Supervisor, Tuolumne County