



STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
DEPARTMENT of NATURAL and CULTURAL RESOURCES
DIVISION of PARKS and RECREATION
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March 26, 2024

The Honorable Kevin Avard
and the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
State House Room 103
Concord, NH 03301

RE: HB1179-FN relative to state park system fees for retired members of the armed forces.

Dear Chair Avard and Members of the Committee,

Please accept this testimony on behalf of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, Division of Parks and Recreation ("Division") regarding HB1179-FN relative to state park system fees for retired members of the armed forces. NH State Parks has long supported the men and women who serve in the military.

We support removing from current law RSA 216-A:3-g, V(b), referencing NH national guard members who retired in pay grade E6 or below as eligible for free day use admission. We provide a variety of programs to benefit military personnel and wish to share the following information.

By way of background, the State Park Fund was established in 1991, creating an operationally self-funded parks system. The House Appropriations Committee report that recommended passage wrote: *"This bill establishes the New Hampshire state park and ski areas as an enterprise-type self-funded, accountable business entity to provide improved park and ski recreation facilities and services to New Hampshire citizens and tourists alike."*

The fee approval process through the Joint Legislative Fiscal Committee pursuant to RSA 216-A:3-g, was established *"...to provide the department with the ability to maximize revenues and to adjust fees according to market conditions and trends as is the common practice in private industry."*

The opportunity to collect revenue at some parks to support the rest of the park system is also at the foundation of our self-funded parks system. RSA 216-A:3-g states that: *"Fees for the use of park areas shall be designed to recover a reasonable portion of budget expenses consistent with the purposes of RSA 216-A:1 and 216-A:3. The general court does not intend that all park facilities be self-supporting."* Of the 93 state park properties, the Division collects a day-use admission fee at only 21 state parks, resulting in 77% of park properties having no day-use admission. Of the 21 parks that collect fees, only 14 state parks provide surplus revenue to support the rest of the state parks system.

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Military retirees are defined as those who have served on active duty in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Space Force or Marine Corps for a period of 20 years or more; or retired medically from the U.S. armed forces listed herein (Defense Finance and Accounting Service). There are 9,533 military retirees in New Hampshire (NH Dept of Military Affairs and Veterans Services). The number of spouses or widowed of NH military retirees that would visit NH State Parks is unknown; however, the average marital status in NH is 51% married and 5.5% widowed according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2022.

Our intent is to make NH state parks as affordable as possible. The \$4 day-use admission fee for adults has not changed since 2010, except for six of our high-use parks where a \$1.00 increase was implemented in 2012. Additionally, NH seniors aged 65 and over are granted free admission to day-use park areas under RSA 218:5-c.

If we charge something to everyone, it helps to make state parks available to all. And, to the extent that we generate a surplus, it allows the Division to continue to re-invest in the parks system and address the \$100 million in deferred maintenance identified in the 2010 Ten Year Strategic Plan, thus providing more recreational opportunities and a better visitor experience. We are experiencing record utility costs, higher construction costs, and responding to severe storm damage at the seacoast and in the north country. Any reduction in revenue would result in a reduction of services and investment in the park system.

The Division continually strives to balance its priorities in part by examining its fee structures, visitation data, and other metrics to inform recommendations for adjustments to its fees. We urge you to please consider fully the impact on revenue, the consistency of this legislation with existing statutes, and New Hampshire's self-funding model for the state park system.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and additional information on HB 1179.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brian J. Wilson", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Brian J. Wilson
Director

C: Sarah L. Stewart, Commissioner, Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

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