

Future of California state parks remains uncertain

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Dozens of California state parks struck down by the budget ax are slated to close their doors in three weeks. Yet that process remains so unsettled that even state officials can't say with certainty how many parks will actually close.

One year ago, the state Department of Parks and Recreation released a list of 70 parks that would be closed to achieve a \$22 million savings in operational costs. The closures – unprecedented in the 150-year history of California state parks – are set to occur no later than July 1.

The uncertainty is a silver lining for park lovers. It means far fewer than the original 70 parks will close, because many local groups have raised money and rallied volunteers to rescue a state park in their community.

“If there's anything positive out of all this, it's that it's connecting local communities back with their parks, making people pay attention to them, and realizing they don't just take care of themselves,” said John Woodbury, general manager of the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District.

Woodbury's organization, in partnership with the nonprofit Napa Valley State Parks Association, signed an agreement with the state to operate two parks: Bothe-Napa Valley State Park and Bale Grist Mill State Historic Park.

The groups have an ambitious plan to turn the neighboring parks into a break-even operation after decades as a money loser for the state. Among other changes, they plan to return the campground to year-round operation, install 13 yurts as pricier overnight accommodations, and turn historic buildings

into rentals.

Dozens of partnerships across the state are still in the works at this late date, partly because the state has never before handed over an entire park to a nonprofit group. It took months to resolve the legal issues and prepare contracts. And every such agreement is different, so a uniform approach was impossible.

Roy Stearns, a state parks department spokesman, said last week his agency's best estimate is that 22 parks have operating agreements signed with new partners that will keep them open. Such agreements are pending at 14 other parks.

So the worst case at the moment is that 48 parks would close, not 70. The number may drop to 34 – and possibly lower.

The state also is mulling concession contracts with private companies to operate other parks on the closure list. These numbers are even less certain because the most recent closing date for bids was just five days ago.

“We do not have a listing of what parks will close, as we are still in the process of seeking partners,” Stearns said via email. “We shall not be putting a park on the closed list if there appears to be a deal in the works that is possible soon.”

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