

Brown signs bill to keep state parks open for 2 years

By Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO – Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation Tuesday setting a two-year moratorium on closing state parks in the wake of a scandal in which some parks officials hid surplus funds while facilities were threatened with being shuttered.

The legislation by Assemblyman Bob Blumenfield, D-Woodland Hills, was in response to the discovery in July that some parks officials had concealed about \$54 million in unspent funds even as the governor was proposing to close 70 parks because of a budget shortfall.

“Rogue bureaucrats lied to all of us,” Blumenfield said Tuesday. “The governor acted swiftly and appropriately to remove them. Now, after signing this bill, we can move forward.”

The bill provides \$10 million to match private donations to keep specific parks open, an additional \$10 million to other parks at risk of closure, and a like amount to address maintenance needs that threatened to close some parks.

In addition, the state Park and Recreation Commission will get more money under AB1478 to oversee management of the Parks and Recreation Department to help ensure there are no more financial shenanigans.

The governor also signed a bill that requires the parks department to create a plan for increasing private revenue for state sites. It would allow Californians to apply a portion of their state tax refund to the parks in exchange for an annual park pass.

Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, wrote the measure, AB1589, which also requires more accurate and transparent accounting for park system finances. The changes provide “a serious ‘reset’ to an agency that desperately needs it,” Huffman said.

Brown also signed another Huffman measure reshaping the state Department of Fish and Game to provide greater emphasis on conservation, including a change in its name to the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The bill – which some Republicans opposed as an attempt to de-emphasize hunting – also provides for creating an environmental crimes task force to help prosecute crimes against wildlife, and authorizes the department to partner with nonprofit groups and accept funds for additional conservation programs. Brown signed AB 2402 “to improve the management of state fish and wildlife resources,” according to a statement by his office.

In all, the governor signed 49 bills Tuesday, including legislation protecting tenants in properties that wind up in foreclosure or default.

One measure allows a tenant holding a lease to keep possession of the rental unit until the lease expires. Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley, wrote that bill, AB2610. The governor also signed a bill requiring rental applicants to be given notice if a property owner is in default on the mortgage of a home before a lease is approved. Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, is the author of SB1191.