

How a diverse coalition created a new category of camping in California.

California's Low-Impact Camping Areas Act (AB 2025-518) shows how conservation groups, farmers and ranchers, outdoor-equity advocates, industry leaders, and local governments can align around one simple idea: let rural and agricultural landowners offer small-scale recreation to conserve land and expand outdoor access.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On October 2, 2025, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 518 into law, creating the state's first legal definition of “low-impact camping areas” (LICAs) and a streamlined path for counties to permit them. AB 518 passed the Legislature with near-unanimous, bipartisan support after a broad coalition of conservation groups, agricultural organizations, outdoor-equity advocates, outdoor industry representatives, and local elected officials came together in support.

The bill does three things at once: it conserves private land by giving landowners a new, low-cost way to earn supplemental income and keep their properties intact; it expands outdoor access at a moment when more than half of California campers report difficulty finding or booking a site; and it strengthens agricultural viability by opening a new agritourism revenue stream—all while leaving the decision of whether, where, and how to support and manage this land use entirely in the hands of local government.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Outdoor recreation hit a record high in 2024, with more than 19.7 million Californians getting outside. California's outdoor recreation economy is worth an estimated \$87.9 billion, making it the largest outdoor recreation economy in the United States. However, over half of all campers now report difficulty finding or booking a campsite, up from just 10% in 2019. At the same time, farmers, ranchers, and rural landowners across the state face rising costs and volatile markets, and need supplemental income to keep their businesses economically viable and their properties intact. Low-impact camping offers exactly that.

The obstacle was state permitting. Under the Special Occupancy Parks Act (SOPA), any camping area with two or more sites needed a state permit from the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) on top of local approval. SOPA was written to regulate large commercial campgrounds, RV parks, and mobile-home developments — not three weekend campsites on a working ranch. Complying with SOPA could take up to 18 months and cost as much as \$100,000 in infrastructure improvements. AB 518 fixed that mismatch by exempting qualifying, locally-approved sites from the redundant state process.



VOICES FROM THE COALITION

“AB 518 will ensure that more Californians—regardless of income, background, or zip code—can experience the joy of camping and the beauty of our state’s public lands.”

CHRIS WARD

Assemblymember (D-San Diego)

“AB 518 will help break down barriers to camping and open the door for more Californians to build lasting connections with nature.”

JAZZARI T. TAYLOR

Policy Advocate, Latino Outdoors

“Farmers and ranchers have always been the best stewards of the land, and AB 518 gives them a new opportunity to share that land with Californians and visitors alike who want to experience the outdoors. This law will strengthen rural economies, support working lands, and create new ways for communities to connect with agriculture.”

STEVEN FENAROLI

Policy Advocacy Director, California Farm Bureau

“This is a huge win for Californians and all those who love to camp. For too long, families have struggled to find a place to pitch a tent.”

ALYSSA RAVASIO

CEO and Founder, Hipcamp

A STATEWIDE, CROSS-SECTOR COALITION WORKING TOGETHER

AB 518 was built by a diverse coalition of stakeholders all interested in expanding outdoor access, conserving habitat and open spaces, and creating compatible opportunities for farmers and ranchers to stay economically viable.

Formal supporters included:

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

Outdoor equity and access organizations. Latino Outdoors, Outdoor Afro, Black Surfers Collective, City Surf Project, Surf Justice Collective, Outdoor Outreach, Explore Local Nature, Founded Outdoors.

Agriculture and rural economy groups. California Farm Bureau Federation, California Certified Organic Farmers, Community Alliance with Family Farmers, California Association for Local Economic Development, Apple Hills Growers Association, 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, Willow Creek Chamber of Commerce.

Outdoor industry and retailers. REI Co-op, Marmot, VF Corporation, Big Agnes, NEMO Equipment, the Outdoor Industry Association, Hipcamp, Little Kamper LP, Pathloom, Ramble, Salewa, Top Rope Media, Tahoe Mountain Sports.

Local governments. County Boards of Supervisors in Inyo, Mendocino, Santa Barbara, and San Benito, plus individual supervisors from Humboldt, Nevada, San Luis Obispo, and Tuolumne counties.

WHAT AB 518 DELIVERS

Conservation, access, and agricultural viability.

Conserving Private Land

AB 518 gives rural landowners a way to generate revenue from land they already own, without subdividing, developing, or selling it—supporting the state’s Outdoors for All Strategy, which calls for partnering with private landowners on low-impact camping regulations and opportunities.

Expanding Outdoor Access

By making it easier to offer low-impact camping areas across rural California, AB 518 addresses the state’s campsite shortage and eases pressure on crowded public lands—while keeping the decision of where and how to allow camping entirely local.

Strengthening Agricultural Viability

Hosting a handful of low-impact campsites requires minimal infrastructure and financial investment, making it one of the most accessible new revenue tools for farmers and ranchers facing rising costs and thin margins.



AT A GLANCE: WHAT QUALIFIES AS A LOW-IMPACT CAMPING AREA

- 2 acres minimum; up to 9 total campsites, no more than 4 for RVs
- Density capped at 1 campsite per acre
- Located outside urban and suburban zones
- A property manager or operator available 24/7 while campers are present
- Full compliance with local fire, sanitation, noise, and waste-disposal rules
- Stays capped at 14 consecutive nights, 28 nights per calendar year, per camper
- Local government must opt in—the state definition is a floor, not a ceiling, and counties retain full authority to add additional rules, fees, or taxes to their local permitting requirements

ALREADY LEADING THE WAY: CALIFORNIA COUNTIES PAVING THE PATH

AB 518 did not invent the idea of low-impact camping on private land—it codified and streamlined what a growing number of California counties had already figured out on their own. AB 518 went into effect in January 2026. Since then, even more counties have joined the growing movement of simplifying approvals for low-impact camping in their communities.

County	Policy / Ordinance	What It Does
San Benito	<i>Low Impact Camping Ordinance</i>	Allows up to 9 sites (tent, RV, glamping, or yurt) on rural and agricultural land with minimal infrastructure.
Santa Barbara	<i>Agricultural Enterprise Ordinance</i>	Streamlines approval for rural recreation and low-impact camping on working farms.
San Luis Obispo	<i>Rural Recreation and Camping</i>	Small-scale, temporary tent, van, or RV camping on rural/ag land; backed by the local Farm Bureau.
Nevada	<i>Campgrounds, Low-Intensity</i>	Lower-intensity camping in rural and forested areas, with less infrastructure and traffic.
Tehama	<i>Agritourism / Glamping Uses</i>	Permits agritourism, geotourism, and glamping on rural and agricultural properties.
Trinity	<i>Temporary Occupancies</i>	Allows temporary occupancies, including camping and placement of recreational vehicles.

A MODEL TO REPLICATE

AB 518 works because it respects local control while removing an unnecessary state barrier. For counties within California, the next steps are straightforward: review AB 518's statutory language, adopt or update a local ordinance using the state framework as a starting point, and notify HCD of the county's exemption. For legislators and advocates in other states, AB 518 offers a tested template: define low-impact camping distinctly from commercial campgrounds, keep the decision local and opt-in, set a floor of health and safety standards, and seek feedback from diverse stakeholders.

We are here to help.

If you're interested in learning how low-impact camping on rural and agricultural land could fit into your county's land use code—or in adapting AB 518 as a model for your state—reach out to policy@hipcamp.com for resources, economic-benefit modeling, and draft ordinance templates.