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Palomar Mountain State Park could see a reprieve from closure before July 1 | Photo: [mutbka/Flickr/Creative Commons License](#)

There is some light at the end of the tunnel.

Of the 70 state parks on the closure hit list, 11 have been temporarily saved, and there are currently 24 in rescue negotiations, according to a list from the state. "They have strong possibility but are not done yet," Roy Stearns, Deputy Director of California State Parks, said in a phone interview about ongoing partnership agreements.

Unprecedented [closures](#) -- 25% of California's state parks -- announced last year are leaving operators grasping for patchwork solutions to the problem. The closures are the result of an

ailing economy and Governor Jerry Brown's fiscal budget, which cuts millions in funding to the State Parks: \$11 million by this year and \$22 million by next year.

Parks that Could be Temporarily Saved

List accurate as of publishing

Annadel State Park
Anderson Marsh State Park
Austin Creek SP
Bale Grist Mill SHP
Benicia Capitol State Historic Park
Benicia State Recreation Area
Bothe-Napa Valley State Park
Bidwell Mansion SHP
Castle Rock SP
Governor's Mansion SHP
Jack London State Historic Park
Los Encinos SHP
Palomar Mountain State Park
Petaluma Adobe SHP
Point Cabrillo Light Station
Pio Pico SHP
Portola Redwoods SP
Railtown 1897
Santa Cruz Mission SHP
Santa Susana Pass SHP
Sonoma Coast SP (Sections of)
Sugarloaf Ridge State Park
Twin Lakes State Beach
California Mining and Mineral Museum

The state is crossing its t's and dotting the i's before moving parks to the temporarily saved list, even if solid partnerships have already been announced. Their criteria includes waiting for the Director's signature, approval from the department of General Services and a vetting through the legal office.

If operating partnerships are not secured by July 1, the remaining parks will officially close.

"Let me be very clear: we are not selling the parks, we are not giving them away. We can't do that; it's prohibited by law. We're looking for non-profits," Stearns said.

There are two main things one needs to operate a park: a funding stream and management skills. The biggest challenge is finding organizations up to the task. "Many non-profits are highly run, highly organized groups. Other non profits -- maybe two, three or four people that maybe get together to do docent training or tours on the weekend -- don't have the management skills or funding resources to operate a park," Stearns explained.

The amount of money a park needs to operate can vary from a few hundred thousand dollars to the millions, depending on size. One park in Northern California, Henry Coe State Park, was almost single handedly saved by a donor, who made his fortune in Silicon Valley. The Antelope Valley Indian Museum also received a large, anonymous donation that allowed the site to stay open. However, it's more likely to be a consortium of dollars raised in conjunction with local efforts. McGrath State Beach, for example, had strong community backing that led to numerous grant funds.

State Parks Temporarily Saved

List accurate as of publishing

Antelope Valley Indian Museum
Colusa-Sacramento River SRA
Del Norte Coast Redwoods State Park
Henry W. Coe State Park
McGrath State Beach
Mono Lake Tufa State Natural Reserve
Samuel P. Taylor
Tomales Bay State Park
South Yuba River SHP
Jug Handle State Natural Reserve
Plumas-Eureka SP

Unfortunately, reprieve doesn't mean the struggle is over. "Most of the reprieve agreements that have been finalized are between one year and three years," said Alexis Stoxen, Communications Assistant for the California State Parks Foundation (CSPF).

After that, the partnerships would need to be renewed or re-examined.

"Best case scenario is that we reestablish a secure funding source from the state, so the state is able to cover state parks," she said.

Last election, [Proposition 21](#) suggested an \$18 addition to the California License fee, thereby guaranteeing California plated cars free access to state parks and dedicating \$500 million annually to the state's 278 parks.

"It got defeated at the ballot, unfortunately," Stoxen lamented. "Our organization thought that was a great idea. Perhaps in a few years we can come up with something similar. There isn't enough general funding to go around."

The general fund decreases have been dramatic over the years. According to Stearns, in the fiscal year of 2006-2007, the general fund -- the tax money given to state parks for operation and maintenance -- was \$175 million. "Now it's \$110 million," he noted.

Fortunately, there is no deadline for re-opening. July 1 is the deadline for saving \$22 million dollars. If a park doesn't have a partner and a signed agreement by then, it will likely close. "However, if along comes August or September and another partnership offer then becomes possible we'll look into it," Stearns said. "If we close a park, and the state funding returns, we can open them in the future."



Sonoma Coast State Preserve is among the state park units that could be reprieved | Photo: [Rob DeGraff/Flickr/Creative Commons License](#)

Economic Repercussions of Closure

The parks require a significant amount of maintenance for roads, trails, campgrounds, fire spaces, tents and cabins, and more. Human use takes its toll and neglect only increases the problems and the costs. "It's like your house," Stearns explained. "If you don't fix your roof, it usually deteriorates into a bigger loss... if you don't vacuum for a whole year, what's the place going to look like?"

Stearns said that the last 20 years of budget cuts forced the parks to defer maintenance as a way to save money, but the costs continually compound themselves. He now says there is a maintenance backlog of \$1.3 billion. "It's what's been happening to the state for the last 20-25 years as budgets shrink and people are less willing to pay taxes to support the government."

Closing the parks will intensify this problem further.

Closing the parks also threatens local businesses and may lead to losses in local fees and taxes. A grassroots effort in conjunction with CSPF called Save our State Parks (SOS), focuses on the economic aspect. ["Closing Parks is Bad for Business,"](#) is the rally.

The campaign delineates how the 65.5 million people who visit California's state parks spend an average of \$42 a day, and \$3.2 billion annually on goods and services related to their park visits.

Los Angeles is California's most populous county and includes 21 state parks. According to the SOS fact sheet, nearly \$192 million in labor income is earned annually by workers in jobs supported by the state parks.

Safety Repercussions of Closure

In July of last summer, Minnesota temporarily closed their state parks for a week during a budget freeze.

"They had people breaking into the parks, they had vandalism, graffiti, damage to picnic tables and that was just after one week. We looked at that in California and thought: what if that is what we have looking ahead?" Stoxen said.

[A recent slew of crimes](#) during a brief closure in the remote Providence Mountain State Recreation area near San Diego does not bode well, either. "It was really horrible," Stoxen said. "It was a while before people even knew what was happening because it was so remote," Crimes included theft of invaluable historic items and hundreds and thousands of dollars worth of copper wire lines.

Stearns said the threat to cultural resources is "worrisome" and a "big priority."