



ALEX JOERS

WISCONSIN STATE REPRESENTATIVE
79TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, and Outdoor Recreation
AB 139: waiver of fees for admission to state parks on Earth Day
May 2, 2023

Chairman Mursau and members of the Committee:

Thank you for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 139. As a co-author of this legislation, I am incredibly excited to be here with you all to advocate for Earth Day and stewardship in Wisconsin. This bill seeks to waive the fee for Wisconsin State Parks every year on Earth Day, April 22.

Environmental education and stewardship are important values many Wisconsinites believe in prioritizing. Earth Day is a universal event that promotes both environmental awareness and encourages individuals to take action to protect our planet. Many people celebrate Earth Day by visiting one of our many state parks to appreciate the natural beauty of our environment. However, admission fees may hinder some people's ability to spend this holiday surrounded by Wisconsin's breathtaking scenery.

Furthermore, by offering free admission to state parks on Earth Day, Wisconsin can join other states, such as Washington, in the global effort to promote environmental awareness and conservation. This can help position the state as a leader in environmental stewardship and increase out-of-state tourism.

This proposal of waiving admission fees for Wisconsin State Parks on Earth Day will serve as an incentive to encourage state park visits and in turn help continue to promote economic return benefiting communities across the state. Free Earth Day admission to state parks will also be a powerful symbol of the state's commitment to the environmental preservation of the natural beauty of Wisconsin.

Please join me in supporting AB 139.

May 2, 2023

Testimony on Assembly Bill 139

Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

Thank you, Chairman Mursau and committee members, for having a hearing today on Assembly Bill 139 relating to the waiver of fees for admission to state parks on Earth Day.

Enjoying the scenery Wisconsin State Parks have to offer is one of the many ways someone can learn about the value of Earth Day. Promoting the values of Earth Day gives individuals the tools to learn the many ways of protecting the environment.

I have two state parks in my district. One is named *Big Bay State Park*, which is located on the eastern side of Madeline Island. This park gives way to scenic sandstone bluffs along four miles of Lake Superior shoreline. The park also has a 1-mile boardwalk, a sandy swimming beach, hiking trails, a large family campground, and two group camps. The other state park is named *Cooper Falls State Park*. This park is home to ancient lava flows, deep gorges, and spectacular waterfalls and offers a near-two-mile hiking trail that is one of the best hikes in Wisconsin.

This bill would give everyone in Wisconsin, including those in my district, the opportunity to enjoy these two fabulous state parks and the other 48 parks on Earth Day without worrying about an admission fee. Everyone should be able to share in the appreciation of and have the desire to conserve our environment for future generations to enjoy.

I am thankful for the opportunity to collaborate on this bill with my colleague from across the aisle, Representative Jores. Thank you for your time today, and thank you for your consideration of this bill.



Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

2023 Assembly Bill 139

Waiver of fees for admission to state parks on Earth Day

May 2, 2023

Good morning, Chair Mursau and members of the Committee. My name is Steve Schmelzer, and I am the Bureau Director overseeing the Wisconsin State Park System for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 139 (AB 139), related to the waiver of fees for admission to state parks on Earth Day.

Earth Day is recognized as one of the largest civic events in the world and is designed to help raise awareness of protecting our natural environment. Allowing visitors to discover the natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities within our state by visiting a property within the State Park System can make a positive lifelong impact. Last year, the state park system saw over 19 million visitors across more than 100 properties. Allowing a free admission day could inspire many to continue visiting our State Park System properties and to purchase either an annual admission pass or daily pass in the future.

Under AB 139, the department would waive admission fees normally required to enter State Park System properties on April 22, of each year in recognition of Earth Day. Several other states allow free admission either for all state parks or in conjunction with special events at specific parks. These free days occur either on Earth Day or on a weekend date to celebrate Earth Day. This bill would have minimal effects on administrative procedures and management. Property staff would manage this day like the Free Fun Weekend in June where admission fees are waived at properties. We would allow entry and track capacity at all properties like normal but would not collect any admission fees or require a sticker or daily admission pass to be displayed on vehicles. All other property rules would remain in effect, as public safety is always a top priority.

The department supports all efforts to increase public access to the many outdoor recreation activities available throughout Wisconsin. We also support the celebration of Earth Day and in recognition, the department generally hosts a variety of special events and volunteer activities. Of course, we are always mindful of balancing the self-funded model of our State Park System and making sure we effectively manage the revenue coming in from visitors each year to provide high quality outdoor recreation opportunities.

It is important to keep the self-funded model of our State Park System in mind to ensure our continued ability to provide the best outdoor recreation experience for our visitors. There are currently several fee waiver programs offered by the State Park System. Last year, State Park System properties reported administering 8,542 fee waivers, totaling \$95,637. A sum sufficient transfer from the general fund, similar to the approach taken by the Governor when including admission waivers in his biennial budget

request, would help offset the financial impacts of this bill. We appreciate the benefits this bill could offer by encouraging a broader population to experience our state parks.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, I would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



DIANNE H. HESSELBEIN

STATE SENATOR • SENATE DISTRICT 27

Testimony of Sen. Dianne Hesselbein
Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
AB 139: waiver of fees for admission to state parks on Earth Day
May 2nd, 2023

Chairman Mursau and members of the Committee:

Thank you for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 139. I am pleased to be an author of this important legislation, and I appreciate your attention to Earth Day and stewardship in Wisconsin. As stated in the analysis, this bill requires the DNR to waive any daily fee for admission to a state park on April 22nd of each year in commemoration of Earth Day.

As you know, this year was the 53rd anniversary of Earth Day. This day, known around the world as a time to recommit ourselves to stewardship and environmental education, was founded by Wisconsin's former Governor and U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson. In 1970, then-Senator Nelson initiated the idea of doing a national teach-in to urge Washington to recognize the public concern for the environmental issues of the time. This effort transformed into a movement and continues to inspire generations to take up the cause of environmental conservation.

Nelson wanted us to be able to appreciate our natural resources and conserve our environment for future generations to enjoy. We often forget the importance of nature in our everyday lives. This proposal is an effort to make sure that anyone who wants to spend their Earth Day at one of our state parks can do so. Wisconsin's commitment to conservation has been cherished by generations and can be shared by all of its people. The best way to commemorate that vision is to encourage all Wisconsinites to take sanctuary in their natural surroundings.

The idea for the proposal comes from one of the teachers in my district. She told me that she wanted to bring her class to a state park on Earth Day to commemorate the positive impacts of a healthy environment on our community. Unfortunately, it was too expensive. I've heard the same complaint from Girl Scout Leaders.

This proposal will help highlight Wisconsin's proud tradition of stewardship. Wisconsinites will have a better opportunity to appreciate and learn from their natural surroundings. The State of Washington recently offered free access to state parks on Earth Day. This committee has the opportunity to honor our 'Conservation Governor' while also continuing the legacy he left in our state.

Please join me in supporting AB 139.



Romaine Robert Quinn

STATE SENATOR • 25TH SENATE DISTRICT

From: Senator Romaine Robert Quinn
To: Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
Re: Testimony on Assembly Bill 139
Relating to: waiver of fees for admission to state parks on Earth Day
Date: May 2, 2023

Thank you Chairman Mursau and members of the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 139, a simple but meaningful bill to encourage the good habit of exploring all the natural beauty our state has to offer.

Wisconsin is full of state parks that offer all kinds of natural wonders. Many of them are in the 25th Senate District. We have Pattison State Park, home to Big Manitou Falls, the fourth-highest waterfall east of the Rocky Mountains. Amnicon Falls State Park has picturesque views of waterfalls and rapids that carved their way through the landscape. Big Bay State Park on Madeline Island contains sandstone bluffs along four miles of Lake Superior shoreline. And there are so many more, not only in my area, but all throughout this great state!

These parks are a wonderful asset in and of themselves, but they can also be the first point of entry for people to interact with nature in a meaningful way. Activities like hunting, fishing, boating and water sports, swimming, hiking, biking, skiing, camping, bird-watching, and snowmobiling are very important to me and the people I represent. They're also a big part of the tourism industry that fuels life in the northwoods.

Earth Day is a natural opportunity for us to encourage people of all ages to re-connect with the world around them. The holiday itself has a Wisconsin tie and we in Wisconsin's state government should be encouraging people to fully participate. The Department of Natural Resources estimates its fiscal impact to be in the neighborhood of \$10,000 per year. I say that's a bargain for what this bill could provide to so many!

I would like to thank my colleague, Senator Dianne Hesselbein, for her work on this bill. I would also like to extend those thanks to Representatives Chanz Green and Alex Joers, as well as to all of you for your time and consideration today.