

Senator Giessel, members of the Committee:

I'm grateful for the opportunity to voice support for SB 30, State Park Permits for Disabled Veterans. My name is Phil Hokenson and I'm an Army veteran from Fairbanks. I serve as the Chair of the Alaska Veterans Advisory Council and a member Alaska Pioneer Home Advisory Board.

Alaska is often heralded for being home to the highest per capita population of Veterans—we also have the youngest veteran population and the highest percentage of women veterans. But why do so many veterans choose to relocate to or stay in Alaska once they hang up their uniform? One reason is that this state is among the best in the country at supporting our veterans and acknowledging the value that military veterans bring to our communities. And that's not only through education dollars at the University of Alaska or healthcare dollars through the VA's community care program or the dollars that military retirees and disabled veterans spend in our economy, we also recognize the value they bring as citizens who have stood up on behalf of their country and who often continue to serve in many different ways.

While Alaska is a national leader in supporting veterans in many ways, one place we fall short of a standard that was set by the National Defense Authorization Act of 2022 is in providing veterans with expanded access to the state's parks. That NDAA established free, lifetime access to national parks for all military veterans. With SB 30, we have the opportunity to bring the state closer to that benchmark by offering free, lifetime state park permits to disabled veterans.

Providing disabled veterans with this access not only honors their service but also supports their well-being by offering them a greater opportunity to enjoy the pristine wilderness of the Last Frontier and connect with the land they defended on our behalf. I urge you to pass SB 30 to continue strengthening Alaska's reputation as a state that values and supports our veterans to the utmost.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Senator Giessel, members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in support of Senate Bill 30, State Park Permits for Disabled Veterans. I am Captain Bob Pawlowski, NOAA (Ret) and a VA Beneficiary. Currently I serve as the Chair, Alaska Pioneer Homes Advisory Board, a board that advises the Governor on our Pioneer Homes, including the Alaska State Veterans and Pioneer Home in Palmer. I also serve on the Alaska Commission on Aging, where I personally focus on our aging Veteran population, of which 30% are of the Vietnam Era, which ended 50 years ago. This is a good bill in it offers an opportunity for our disabled Veterans to fully utilize Alaska's State Parks, versus just camping without charge. This is particularly valuable to those disabled seniors who, with age, have had to decrease their camping given the challenges of setting up and taking down a camp. This bill affords them the opportunity to continue to visit our State Parks and enjoy the amenities, ease of access, and outdoor activities on a daily basis that for decades they have enjoyed under their camping permit.

Let me share a personal example of how it will help. Since 2015, I have volunteered and participated in Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing – Alaska, a therapeutic program for disabled Vets that teaches fly tying, rod building and fly fishing with a group of their peers. Through camaraderie and focus on the fine motor and mental skills in tying flies and building rods, they find new ways to meet their challenges. And, when they are out together with other disabled Vets, catching their first fish on their own fly on their own rod, you see their pride and the value of the program, And this is but one of many programs in Alaska that are helping our disabled Vets adapt and heal by being outdoors .

By offering no charge access to our state parks for Alaska's disabled Vets, you are enabling them to take more time to be outdoors and enjoy the Alaska they have chosen to live and grow old in.

Thank you. I am free to answer any questions.

*(Captain Bob Pawlowski, NOAA (Ret) has been active in military and veteran issues since moving permanently to Alaska. He remains active with the Military Officers Association of America, the Navy League of the United States, and most recently on the AARP Alaska Veteran Program. .He lives in Anchorage with his wife Paula.)*

TO: Senator Jessie Bjorkman & Alaska Senate Resource Committee Members

FROM: Nate Craig, District D Constituent

Subject: 34th Legislature, Feedback for Senate Bill 30, State Park Permits for Disabled Veterans

## Introduction

The purpose of this letter is to provide feedback on Senate Bill 30 for consideration. While the bill commendably includes free parking and restroom access at developed facilities, it falls short of making a meaningful impact for disabled veterans by omitting boat and watercraft fee exemptions.

### 1. Recommendation: Include Boat and Watercraft Fee Exemptions

- a. Expanding the bill to exempt disabled veterans (those with a disability rating of over 50% and an honorable discharge) from boat and watercraft fees at all state-owned locations managed by Alaska State Parks and Outdoor Recreation would further demonstrate the state's commitment to those who have served.
- b. This addition would align with existing Alaska programs, such as the Disabled Veteran Hunting and Fishing License, which is already offered free of charge to eligible veterans. Additionally, many other states provide similar benefits, reinforcing the value of such an exemption:
  - California – The Distinguished Veteran Pass grants free day-use access, family camping, and boat use at over 100 state-operated sites for veterans with an honorable discharge, California residency, and a 50% or greater service-connected disability.
  - Washington – The Lifetime Disabled Veteran Pass provides free day-use parking, boat launch, and watercraft launching for Washington residents with a 30% or greater service-connected disability.
  - Virginia – The Disability Passport covers vehicle parking, admission for the pass holder and their assistant, boat launch fees, and horse trailer parking for residents with a 100% service-connected disability.
- c. Adding a similar exemption in Alaska would ensure Senate Bill 30 delivers a more meaningful benefit to disabled veterans.

### 2. Maintain the Two-Year Renewal Period

- a. I strongly advise against extending the pass beyond the current two-year renewal period. Regular renewal processes help maintain checks and balances, prevent fraud, and ensure the program remains responsive to future legislative improvements. Instead of making the pass indefinite, the focus should be on expanding its benefits, such as waived boat and watercraft fees, to provide greater value to veterans.

### 3. Transition to a Veteran Identification Card Instead of a Vehicle Sticker

- a. Currently, the pass is issued as a vehicle sticker, limiting its usability to a single registered vehicle. A more effective and flexible approach would be to issue a

Veteran Identification Card, which could be displayed on the dashboard or another visible location when using state park facilities.

b. Benefits of this change include:

- Allowing veterans to access benefits regardless of the vehicle they are using.
- Reducing administrative costs by eliminating the need to reissue stickers when a veteran changes vehicles.
- Aligning with the Disabled Veteran Hunting and Fishing License, which is issued on paper and can be easily replaced if lost.

c. This update would streamline processes, enhance accessibility, and reduce administrative burdens for both veterans and state agencies.

#### 4. Expand Access to Issuing Locations and Reduce Processing Time

a. Currently, passes are only issued at Alaska Department of Natural Resources (DNR) offices in Anchorage and Fairbanks, and processing can take a week or more. This system creates unnecessary delays and inconvenience for veterans outside these areas.

b. Recommended improvements:

- Enable same-day issuance at multiple state offices across Alaska.
- Allow online applications with digital or mail-in verification to improve accessibility for rural veterans.

c. Expanding access to these passes would ensure timely distribution and better service for those who need it.

#### Background on Senate Bill 30

5. Senate Bill 30 proposes granting lifetime permits to disabled veterans for free access to state park campsites, parking, and restroom facilities in Alaska. This would replace the current two-year permit system with a one-time issuance that is automatically renewed every five years upon confirmation of the veteran's mailing address. The bill requires the Alaska DNR to issue these permits free of charge and mandates an annual report on the number of permits issued. The act is set to take effect on January 1, 2026.

#### 6. Fiscal Impact

- In 2024, the fiscal notes for Senate Bill 164 (the previous fiscal year bill) estimated an annual revenue loss of \$240,000 from parking permit fees due to approximately 4,000 disabled veterans qualifying for the benefit. This revenue loss would be covered by state general funds (UGF).
- Note: This bill did not include boat and watercraft fee exemptions.

a. Current Alaska Veteran Benefit Programs. As of 2024, Alaska provides several free or discounted outdoor recreation benefits for disabled veterans:

- Disabled Veteran (DAV) Camping Pass – Provides free camping at Alaska State Park campgrounds for veterans with a 50% or greater service-connected disability who have been Alaska residents for at least 12 months. Currently, it does not include free parking or restroom access.

- Disabled Veteran Hunting and Fishing License – Allows free hunting and sport fishing licenses for qualified veterans.
  - Federal Military Lifetime Pass – Grants free lifetime access to over 2,000 federal recreation sites, including national parks and forests.
- b. These programs highlight Alaska’s commitment to veterans, but Senate Bill 30 could be significantly improved by expanding access to watercraft exemptions and modernizing pass distribution.

Conclusion

7. Senate Bill 30 is a step in the right direction, but meaningful improvements are necessary to maximize its impact.
- a. I strongly recommend:
- Including boat and watercraft fee exemptions for disabled veterans.
  - Maintaining the two-year renewal period to uphold accountability and integrity.
  - Replacing the vehicle sticker system with a formal identification, greater flexibility.
  - Expanding pass issuance locations to reduce processing time, improve access.
- b. These changes would enhance accessibility, reduce administrative burdens, and provide more meaningful support to Alaska’s disabled veterans.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to seeing these recommendations incorporated into Senate Bill 30 this year.

Best regards,



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