



---

# JOEL KITCHENS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1<sup>ST</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## **Testimony for the Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks, and Outdoor Recreation Assembly Bill 11 May 2, 2023**

Thank you, Chairman Mursau and members of the committee for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 11.

In fourth grade, kids learn a lot of things about our great state. They learn about its history and how government works. Assembly Bill 11 will add a free field trip for their entire family with free admission to our amazing and beautiful State Parks.

I introduced AB 11 to promote awareness of our state park system, introduce young people to the joys of outdoor activities, boost our local economies, and foster an appreciation for the beauty of our great state.

More specifically, this legislative proposal waives the annual state parks vehicle admission fee for families of public or private school students in fourth grade, which will encourage families to spend time together outdoors and experience our state parks, forests, recreational areas, and trails.

I believe that once these families get the opportunity to enjoy one of our beautiful state parks, they will purchase passes in the years to come. It's my hope it will draw people to our parks who have never visited a state park. That will undoubtedly generate even more revenue for our state parks system and create a strong economic impact throughout all of Wisconsin.

As state residents travel throughout Wisconsin to visit our 66 state parks, they will be spending money on such things as lodging, dining, shopping, and fuel. In addition to supporting local businesses, AB 11 helps to ensure that our families stay in Wisconsin to experience the outdoors instead of traveling to other states.

Thank you for your time and I hope you consider supporting Assembly Bill 11. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

# **ROBERT L. COWLES**

**Wisconsin State Senator, 2nd Senate District**

**STANDING COMMITTEES:**

Natural Resources & Energy, Chair  
Transportation & Local Government, Vice-Chair  
Economic Development & Technical Colleges

## **Testimony on 2023 Assembly Bill 11**

**Senator Robert Cowles**

**Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation**

**May 2nd, 2023**

Thank you, Chair Mursau and Committee Members, for holding a hearing and allowing me to testify on 2023 Assembly Bill 11. This bill requires the DNR to waive the fee for an annual vehicle admission sticker to the Wisconsin State Parks System issued to the parent or guardian of a Wisconsin student enrolled in fourth grade.

The Wisconsin State Park System consists of dozens of properties and represents the best of our pristine natural resources, abundance of wildlife, and exceptional recreational opportunities. Wisconsin has a strong history of land and water stewardship and outdoor recreation, becoming the first state to have a state park in 1878 when it formed The State Park in Vilas County. Today our State Parks are visited by around 20 million people annually. But as the next generation increasingly spends more time indoors, we need to focus on maintaining strong appreciation and engagement for these natural treasures and responsible, but frequent use of our public lands.

Assembly Bill 11 waives the fee for an annual vehicle admission sticker to the Wisconsin State Parks System which is issued to the parent or guardian of a public, private, or home schooled school student in fourth grade. As elementary-schoolers start their civic education, this bill would provide these students and their caretakers with the incentive they need to get outside and experience some of our best public lands while spending time with family and building a lifelong respect for our natural resources. This annual sticker, normally \$28 for vehicles with Wisconsin plates, admits anyone inside the vehicle to State Parks and Forests so the whole family can come.

Under Assembly Bill 11, the parent or guardian may only receive one waiver in his or her lifetime, and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) may issue a waiver only once per household. Further, the waived fee for the annual State Parks Sticker would only be issued if evidence is produced that a child is in fourth grade on January 1st of the issued pass's year. Finally, Assembly Bill 11 requires the DNR to provide an activity guide on its website for school-aged children related to State Parks, Forests, Recreational Areas, and Trails to further introduce youth to our state's natural beauty and accompany their new outdoor recreational experiences.

Kids are spending more time in front of screens and less time outdoors, contributing to a less physically and mentally healthy lifestyle and creating bad habits for the future. Assembly Bill 11 serves as a commitment to our state's youth by helping to engage with the next generation of State Park visitors and supporters while encouraging a healthier lifestyle for young Wisconsinites. This bill mirrors the intent of the federal Every Kid in a Park program to get families with 4th graders into parks, but also recognizes that our state is different than federal parks, and prepares a program that does not interrupt the normal operation of our Wisconsin State Park System or its users.

2023 Assembly Bill 11 is a reintroduction of 2019 Assembly Bill 252. In the 2019-20 Legislative Session, this legislation received recommendations for passage by committees in the Assembly and Senate, but did not reach the floor of either house of the Legislature.



## Assembly Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation

### *2023 Assembly Bill 11*

#### *Fee waivers for state park vehicle admission receipts to parents and guardians of 4<sup>th</sup> grade pupils and making an appropriation*

*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 11 (AB 11), related to fee waivers for state park vehicle admission receipts to parents and guardians of 4<sup>th</sup> grade pupils and making an appropriation.

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 free admission for parents and guardians of 4<sup>th</sup> graders 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 11, the department would waive admission fees needed to enter a State Park for parents and guardians of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. Other fees such as overnight camping fees and shelter reservation fees would still apply. To implement this bill, the department would create a fee waiver application where a parent or guardian would demonstrate that their child will be a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student on January 1, of the year in which the waiver is valid. They would then be able to receive an annual admission pass at no cost. Under the bill, this fee waiver would only be available to a parent or guardian once in their lifetime.

The department supports efforts to increase public access to the many outdoor recreation activities available in our state. 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, Wisconsin State Park System properties reported administering 8,542 fee waivers, totaling \$95,637. This bill contains a provision that would use GPR to reimburse the department for any lost admission revenue from issuing fee waivers to the families of 4<sup>th</sup> graders, which is consistent with what the Governor proposed in his biennial budget request. This will help ensure that we are able to provide high quality outdoor recreation opportunities for our visitors.

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