



# COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

For the meeting of: 6/24/2025

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File #: 25-821

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**To:** Board of Supervisors

**From:** Supervisor Mike Wilson

**Agenda Section:** Initiated by Board Member

**Vote Requirement:** Majority

**SUBJECT:**

Letter of Opposition Unless Amended to Assembly Bill (AB) 518 (Ward) Regarding Low-Impact Camping Areas Unless Amended to Address Safety and Agricultural Protection Concerns

**RECOMMENDATION(S):**

That the Board of Supervisors:

1. Adopt a position of oppose unless amended to California AB 518 regarding low-impact camping areas unless amended to address safety and agricultural protection concerns; and
2. Authorize the Chair of the Board to sign the attached letter of opposition unless amended to AB 518; and
3. Direct the Clerk of the Board to send the attached letter of opposition to AB 518 unless amended to the Assembly Housing and Community Development Committee; and
4. Direct staff to coordinate with the California State Association of Counties and Rural County Representatives of California in advocating for the recommended amendments to AB 518; and
5. Authorize the Chair of the Board to support AB 518 if amended to include on-site hosting requirements, proper infrastructure standards and agricultural land protections; and
6. Authorize staff to continue advocacy on this issue and submitting letters consistent with the Board's position throughout the life of AB 518.

**STRATEGIC PLAN:**

The recommended actions support the following areas of the Board of Supervisors' Strategic Plan:

Area of Focus: Core Services/Other

Strategic Plan Category: 9999 - Core Services/Other

**DISCUSSION:**

**Background**

California Assembly Bill 518 (AB 518) would authorize property owners to establish low-impact camping areas accommodating up to nine separate camping sites per property. AB 518 allows for unhosted camping operations where property owners need only to maintain phone contact availability rather than physical presence on-site. While positioned as supporting recreational access, AB 518

lacks adequate safety, environmental and agricultural protection measures critical for rural counties like Humboldt.

Humboldt County spans over 3,500 square miles with 110 miles of coastline - an area the size of Rhode Island and Delaware combined. Many of the agricultural and timber properties located within Humboldt County are in remote areas with poor cell phone coverage, limited emergency services access and inadequate fire department access roads.

#### Key Concerns with AB 518

- **Unhosted Camping Safety Risks:** The most serious concern with AB 518 is the allowance for unhosted camping sites where property owners can operate camping facilities without being present on-site, requiring only phone contact availability. This is wholly inadequate for rural Humboldt County, where many remote agricultural and timber properties have poor or nonexistent cell phone coverage and limited emergency services access. When the "host" could be in another state or country, there is no meaningful on-site management to address emergencies, conflicts or safety issues.
- **Emergency Access and Fire Safety:** Many rural properties lack adequate fire department access roads, making emergency response extremely challenging when no responsible party is physically present. AB 518's lack of exclusions for high fire severity zones compounds these safety concerns in areas with inadequate emergency access and response capabilities.
- **Agricultural Land Conversion:** AB 518 creates economic incentives for abandoning agricultural production in favor of commercial camping enterprises. When agricultural properties can generate substantial revenue from multiple glamping sites-up to nine separate sites under AB 518 - it becomes economically advantageous to abandon crop production and livestock operations. This commodification of agricultural land threatens the viability of working landscapes that are essential to Humboldt County's economy and food security.
- **Inadequate Environmental Controls:** AB 518 lacks sufficient requirements for proper waste disposal infrastructure, which could lead to groundwater contamination, surface water pollution, and accumulation of solid waste that harms local ecosystems. In rural areas with septic systems and private wells, inadequate wastewater management poses direct risks to neighboring properties and water supplies.
- **Enforcement Challenges:** While AB 518 purports to only authorize camping in areas where local governments "opt in," online platforms facilitating these arrangements often do not disclose specific addresses, making it difficult to verify compliance with local ordinances. AB 518 does not provide local governments with adequate tools to compel platforms to remove illegally operating campgrounds, creating enforcement challenges that undermine local control.
- **Lack of Sensitive Land Protections:** AB 518 fails to exclude sensitive lands including high fire severity zones, agricultural zones, and timberlands from camping development. This oversight could result in inappropriate development in areas where camping poses environmental risks or conflicts with existing land uses.

#### Recommended Amendments to Support County Position

To address the County of Humboldt's concerns while supporting expanded camping opportunities, staff recommends the following amendments to AB 518:

- **On-Site Hosting Requirements:** AB 518 should require property owners or designated managers to be physically present on-site during all camping operations, or alternatively, require on-site management 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, with verified emergency communication capabilities in areas with adequate cell coverage and emergency services access.
- **Infrastructure Standards:** AB 518 should establish minimum requirements for wastewater treatment systems appropriate for the number of campers, solid waste management plans, including, without limitation, regular collection and disposal, and adequate water supply systems that do not compromise neighboring properties or environmental resources.
- **Agricultural Land Protections:** AB 518 should include provisions limiting the number of camping sites on agricultural lands to preserve farming viability, requiring agricultural land use compatibility assessments and establishing sunset clauses for

camping operations that convert productive agricultural land.

- **Safety and Environmental Safeguards:** AB 518 should exclude high fire severity zones from camping development unless adequate fire access roads and emergency response capabilities are demonstrated, require environmental impact assessments for camping operations near sensitive habitats or water sources and mandate emergency action plans for remote locations.
- **Enhanced Local Control:** AB 518 should provide local governments with enforcement tools to compel online platforms to remove non-compliant camping operations, require disclosure of specific property addresses for verification of local compliance and establish clear penalties for violations of local zoning and safety requirements.

#### **Environmental Review**

The recommended actions involve adopting a legislative position and transmitting correspondence. No environmental review is required under the California Environmental Quality Act. However, AB 518 itself could have significant environmental impacts through inadequate waste management and development in environmentally sensitive areas.

#### **Consistency with General Plan /Local Coastal Program**

The recommended opposition of AB 518 unless amended to address safety and agricultural protection concerns is consistent with the County of Humboldt's General Plan policies supporting agricultural preservation, public safety and environmental protection. The position also aligns with Local Coastal Program requirements for protecting natural resources and ensuring adequate infrastructure.

#### **SOURCE OF FUNDING:**

General Fund

#### **FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

There are no direct costs associated with the recommended actions currently before the Board. However, AB 518 could create future costs related to emergency response in remote areas, enforcement of violations and environmental cleanup from inadequate waste management systems.

#### **STAFFING IMPACT:**

The recommended actions will not impact current staffing levels.

#### **OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:**

None

#### **ALTERNATIVES TO STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Board discretion.

#### **ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Letter of Opposition to California Assembly Bill 518 (Ward) Regarding Low Impact Camping Areas Unless Amended to Address Safety and Agricultural Protection Concerns
2. Bill Text for California Assembly Bill 518 (Ward)

#### **PREVIOUS ACTION/REFERRAL:**

Meeting of: None

File No.: None