



COUNTY OF MENDOCINO

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND BUILDING SERVICES

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MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 9, 2025

TO: Honorable Board of Supervisors

FROM: Planning & Building Services Staff

SUBJECT: Discussion and Direction to Staff Regarding Next Steps for Establishing a New Use Type of Transient Habitation: Low Intensity Camping (OA_2024-0002)

The intent of this agenda item is to report back to the Board following stakeholder outreach that was conducted in May and June of 2025 to solicit feedback for the creation of an ordinance to allow a new type of transient habitation focused on Low Intensity Camping (LIC) and areas where these uses may be permitted.

Department staff conducted stakeholder meetings at various locations throughout the County in May and June of 2025, including Fort Bragg, Anderson Valley, Covelo, Willits, and Ukiah. Additionally, an online survey was posted on the Department's website with a number of questions intended to help staff establish guidelines for regulating future allowance of low intensity camping. Based on the feedback received at these meetings and online, staff is proposing a number of recommendations to be incorporated into a draft ordinance. Staff is also requesting direction from the Board on several items that were discussed by the Planning Commission but did not generate much comment from stakeholders. The next phase of the project will be for staff to conduct environmental review of the new ordinance, so establishing the scope of the ordinance will be critical.

STATE PROPOSAL

Assembly Bill (AB) 518 is still working its way through the State legislature. The bill was most recently amended in the Senate on July 17, 2025 and re-referred to the Senate Rules Committee. Approval of AB 518 is considered a pre-requisite for adoption of a local ordinance in order to provide an appropriate permitting pathway at the State level. Current permitting requirements for commercial campgrounds require any facility with more than one campsite to be licensed as a commercial campground through the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). AB 518 would allow facilities with 9 or fewer sites to be exempt from those regulations and provide local jurisdictions the opportunity to opt-in to this streamlined permit process. The current text of AB 518 includes a number of criteria that would likely be considered a 'baseline' for any local ordinance:

- A minimum lot size of 2 acres
- A density limit not to exceed 1 temporary sleeping accommodation¹ per acre, with a maximum of 9 sites per property
- No on-street parking allowed
- A property manager or operator must be available 24/7
- Must comply with all health and safety regulations including solid waste, human waste, fire safety, and noise management
- May be rented for no more than 14 consecutive nights and 28 nights total per camper per year

STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

¹ As defined in AB 518: "A temporary sleeping accommodation includes, but is not limited to, a tent, yurt, or recreational vehicle"

The points below were mentioned many times by stakeholders and represent significant areas of concern to the public. Staff recommends that these guidelines be incorporated into any new ordinance:

- Ordinance would be applicable to areas outside of the Coastal Zone roadsheds, as shown on the attached map.
- Require approval of an Administrative Permit by the Zoning Administrator, which may be elevated to review by the Planning Commission if needed
- Minimum lot size of 10 acres
- A requirement that a host or operator must live on-site
- Permitted in zones that allow both residential and transient habitation uses. This would include most zones with the exception of things like industrial.
- Require a minimum setback of 200 feet from property lines. This may be reduced upon approval of a variance.
- Campfires allowed subject to State regulations, including burn bans, fire rings, and defensible space areas containing non-flammable materials
- Require issuance of a business license from the Treasurer-Tax Collector
- Require payment of Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) consistent with other TOT uses

Primary concerns raised by the public included fire danger and general nuisance issues related to hosting guests. Most concurred that by allowing LIC uses only on larger parcels where an operator or host was on-site would resolve most of these concerns.

REQUEST FOR DIRECTION

Several questions that staff had sought input on didn't generate much feedback or result in a majority preference, so direction is requested from the Board in order to help define a project scope.

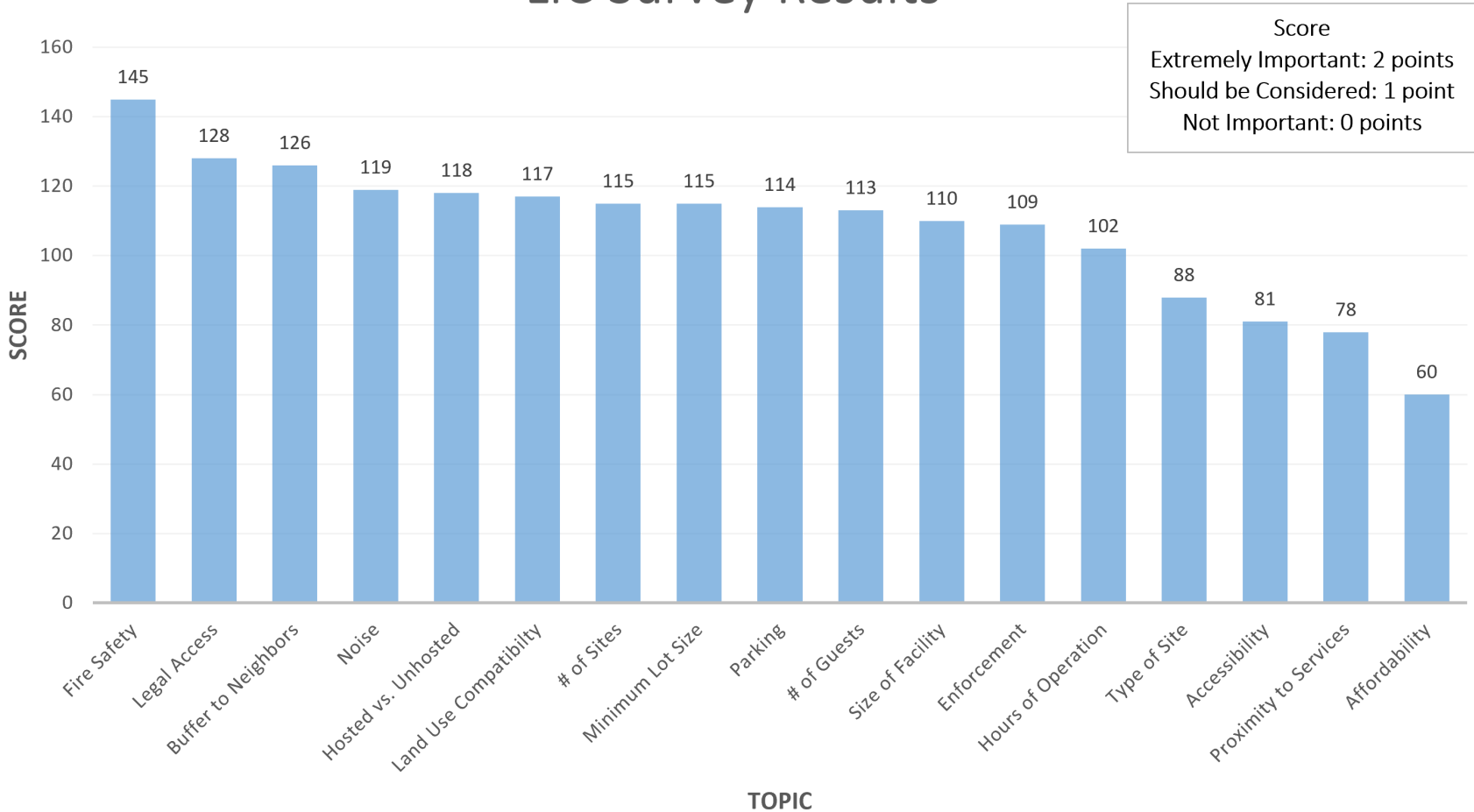
1. Should parcels that are accessed only by private roads be permitted to host LIC sites?
 - a. If yes, should any additional information be required, such as proof of legal access or evidence of a road maintenance agreement?
2. How will enforcement be conducted outside of business hours?
 - a. Should the County explore costs related to developing a host compliance consultant for handling after-hour complaints?
3. Should there be inspections required as part of the permitting process, and/or at regular intervals, such as annually? Alternately, should operators be required to self-report annually or bi-annually?
4. Would the permit allow associated development of the site such as yurts, teepees, and bathroom shower facilities, or should the campsites be kept unimproved on a 'pack in/pack out' basis?

The Department welcomes Board direction to confirm or modify staff recommendations as necessary, and to provide formal direction on the above items.

Attachments:

1. Survey Results Graph 1
2. AB 518 Explainer (May 10, 2025)
3. Regulatory Coastal Zone
4. Coastal Zone Roadsheds
5. Map of Existing Camping Facilities

LIC Survey Results





CA Assembly Bill 518 - Low Impact Camping Areas Act

Author - California State Assembly Member Chris Ward

California needs more campsites to help families get outside.

Outdoor recreation hit a record high in 2022 with more than 19 million Californians getting outside. California's outdoor recreation economy - one of the largest economic drivers in the state - is worth an estimated \$81.5 billion. However, over half of all campers report difficulty finding or booking available campsites, up from only 10% in 2019. Millions of Californians also struggle with the high cost of booking overnight accommodations, especially in heavily touristed areas. Assembly Bill 518 would create more opportunities for camping by establishing a framework to support well-managed private campsites and returning local control over this land use to local government. In turn, AB 518 will increase access to the outdoors and support sustainable tourism and economic development statewide.

What problems does Assembly Bill 518 address?

CA state law currently states that camping areas of any type with two or more campsites need a permit to operate through the CA Department of Community and Housing Development (HCD) **in addition to** a local land-use permit offered by the county or municipal government. The law that governs campgrounds - the Special Occupancy Parks Act (SOPA) - was designed specifically to regulate and permit large commercial campgrounds, RV parks, and mobile home developments – not small, low-impact campsites on a farm, ranch, or rural private land. The process of getting a permit through HCD can take years and cost tens of thousands of dollars, which means that landowners who want to offer limited camping on their properties - even those who get approved at the local level - are effectively priced out of doing so.

AB 518 creates a new category of camping in SOPA for “low impact camping areas” (LICAs) and introduces a new framework for this type of land use that differentiates it from large-scale commercial campgrounds. If camping areas can meet this new definition of “low impact camping areas,” **and exist within a county that authorizes low impact camping**, they would then **only need the required local permits** and be exempted from additional HCD permitting. The benefits of this differentiation in the code are as follows:

- Affirm local control over land use decisions and low-impact camping on private lands. Land use is primarily a local issue – municipal and county governments know where and how to offer this type of camping safely if they want to do so. **AB 518 does not supersede local regulations** by allowing or requiring any LICAs without local approval. Should AB 518 become law, local governments do not have to allow LICAs in their area even if they meet the state definition laid out in AB 518. Rather, local governments would have to **opt into the state exemption** and update their land use codes to govern LICAs as they see fit should they choose to do so.
- Reduce barriers to entry for landowners interested in offering low-impact camping on their properties. As long as they are approved by their local government, landowners would not need to pursue an expensive and time-intensive state permit.
- Support rural economies, agritourism, and agricultural landscapes by creating new revenue streams for rural landowners, farmers, and ranchers.
- Support California in meeting its goals of providing affordable access to the outdoors and conserving private land and biodiversity.

What would “low impact camping areas” look like?

To qualify as a LICA under AB 518 a camping area must meet all of the following criteria and have local authority to operate from a county that opts-into the state exemption:

- Maximum number of sites: 9 or fewer campsites total per property
- Acreage minimum: 2 acres
- Density limits: 1 campsite/acre
- Parking: no on-street parking allowed
- Zoning requirements: property is not within an urban or suburban area
- Hosted: a property manager or operator must be available 24/7
- Health and safety: complies with all local regulations, including those that cover the disposal of trash, human waste, fire safety, and noise management
- Rented for no more than 14 consecutive nights per camper and not exceeding 28 nights per calendar year per camper

Frequently asked questions

Would Assembly Bill 518 change the regulatory burden for local governments?

No. AB 518 does not supersede or require local governments to allow camping in their communities. Instead, AB 518 creates an opportunity for interested local governments to opt-in and create their own regulations for LICAs in their jurisdiction using state language as the baseline. Moreover, an amendment to the bill requires that counties opting-into LICA permitting must require digital marketplaces to include any permit or registration numbers associated with the LICA on the online listing in an effort to support local enforcement efforts.

Do counties have the capacity to manage a potential increase in enforcement issues?

Assembly Bill 518 includes an opt-in clause clarifying that counties may adopt their own LICA-related legislation if they so choose. Those counties will then be responsible for enforcement of LICAs in their jurisdiction. However, in 2024 HCD confirmed that they have received just two complaints regarding LICAs in the last six years – any other complaints regarding noise, neighbor issues, etc. are already handled by local code enforcement agencies and will continue to be handled by them. Nevertheless, an amendment to the bill that requires digital marketplaces to provide a spot on listing pages for local permit or registration numbers from county governments should assist with enforcement as well.

Does AB 518 have any impact on Transient Occupancy Taxes at the local level?

No. AB 518 does not impact how a local government wants to collect tourism taxes. In fact, AB 518 makes it much easier for local governments to update land use codes to allow for LICA-style camping and therefore require and collect taxes on this new and expanding land use.

Low-impact camping is compatible with responsible fire management:

California's [Joint Strategy for Sustainable Outdoor Recreation and Wildfire Resilience](#) makes it clear that the state cannot afford to halt outdoor recreation in the face of a changing climate and longer fire season. Instead, the strategy recommends diversifying recreation opportunities to ensure families can continue to get outside while supporting rural economies. Camping on private land is a fire-safe activity and no more risky than short-term rental guests or a residential property owner having access to a backyard bbq or fire pit. In a public comment in June 2024, Ken Pimlott, former director of CAL FIRE, stated “fire safety requirements on private lands do not need to be unique or prohibitive to ensure that safety is the end result.”

According to the [National Fire Protection Association](#), campfires are one of the least common ignition sources of wildfires in the U.S. Hipcamp, the largest booking platform for camping globally, also reports that between 2014-2024 their campers spent 1.7 million nights outside in California without ever seeing a guest campfire cause a fire emergency.

Should RVs be allowed to stay at low-impact camping areas?

Yes. RV usage is rapidly increasing, particularly among families, first-time campers, communities of color, and retirees. According to the 2024 KOA report, 33% of new campers chose glamping—including RV stays—while tent use continues to decline nationwide. RVs provide a safe, self-contained, and low-impact entry point to nature for a broad and diverse range of Californians.

Similarly, for landowners, hosting RVs requires minimal infrastructure investment, making it an accessible way for farmers, ranchers, and rural landowners to generate supplemental income to conserve their properties and agricultural operations.

Supporter List: The following organizations have formally endorsed Assembly Bill 518

Conservation:

- Audubon California
- Save the Redwoods League
- Trust for Public Land

Outdoor access and equity:

- Black Surfers Collective
- California Trails Foundation

- City Surf Project
- Latino Outdoors
- Outdoor Afro
- Outdoor Outreach
- Salted Roots

Outdoor recreation and retail:

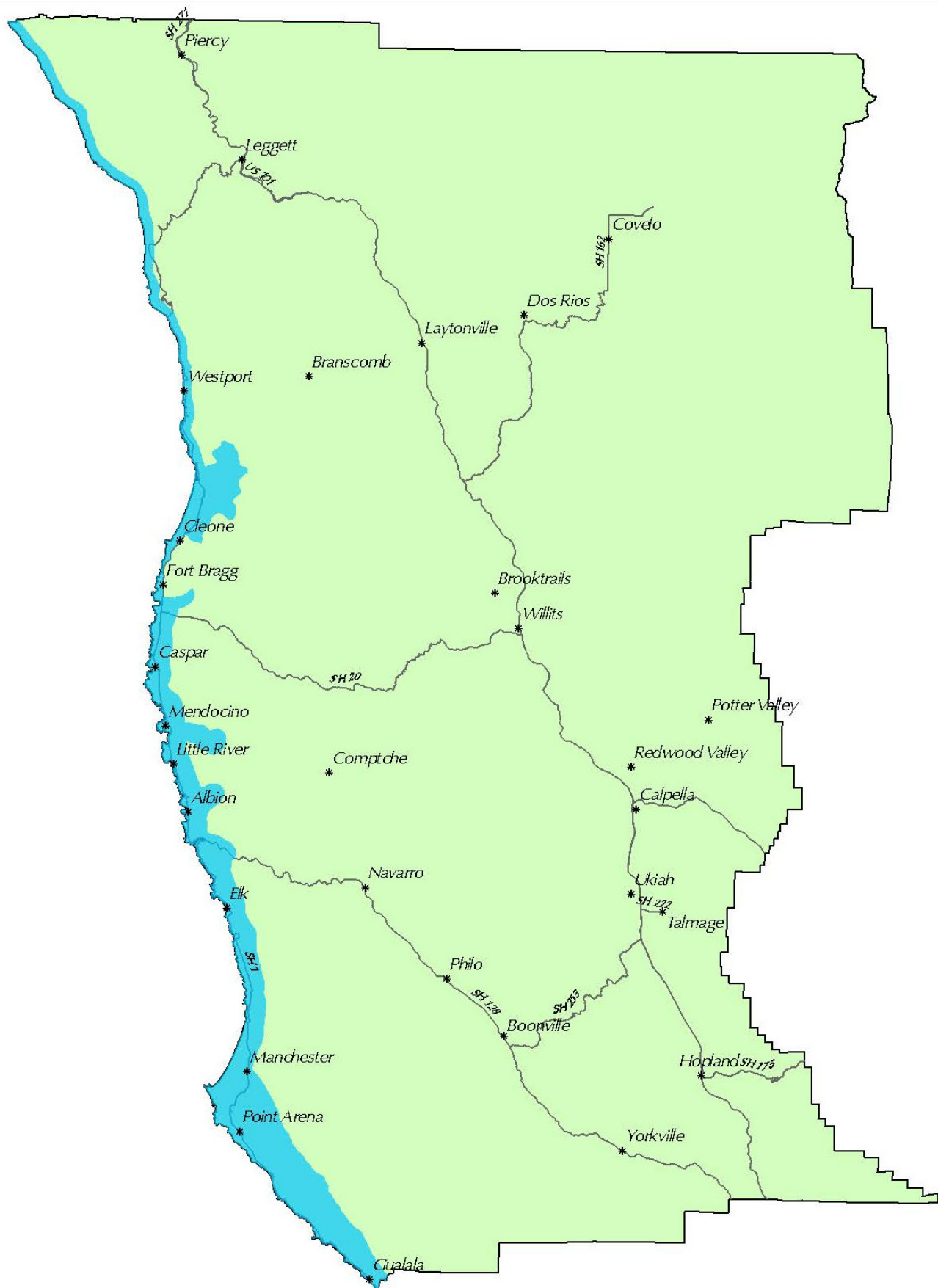
- California Outdoor Recreation Partnership
- California Parks and Recreation Society
- Outdoor Industry Association
- Great Redwood Trail Agency
- Bay Area Ridge Trail Council
- REI Co-op
- Hipcamp, Inc.
- Marmot
- NEMO Equipment, Inc
- San Diego Mountain Biking Association
- Top Rope Media
- Tahoe Mountain Sports
- Pathloom, Inc.
- Coloma Lotus Whitewater
- Little Kamper LP

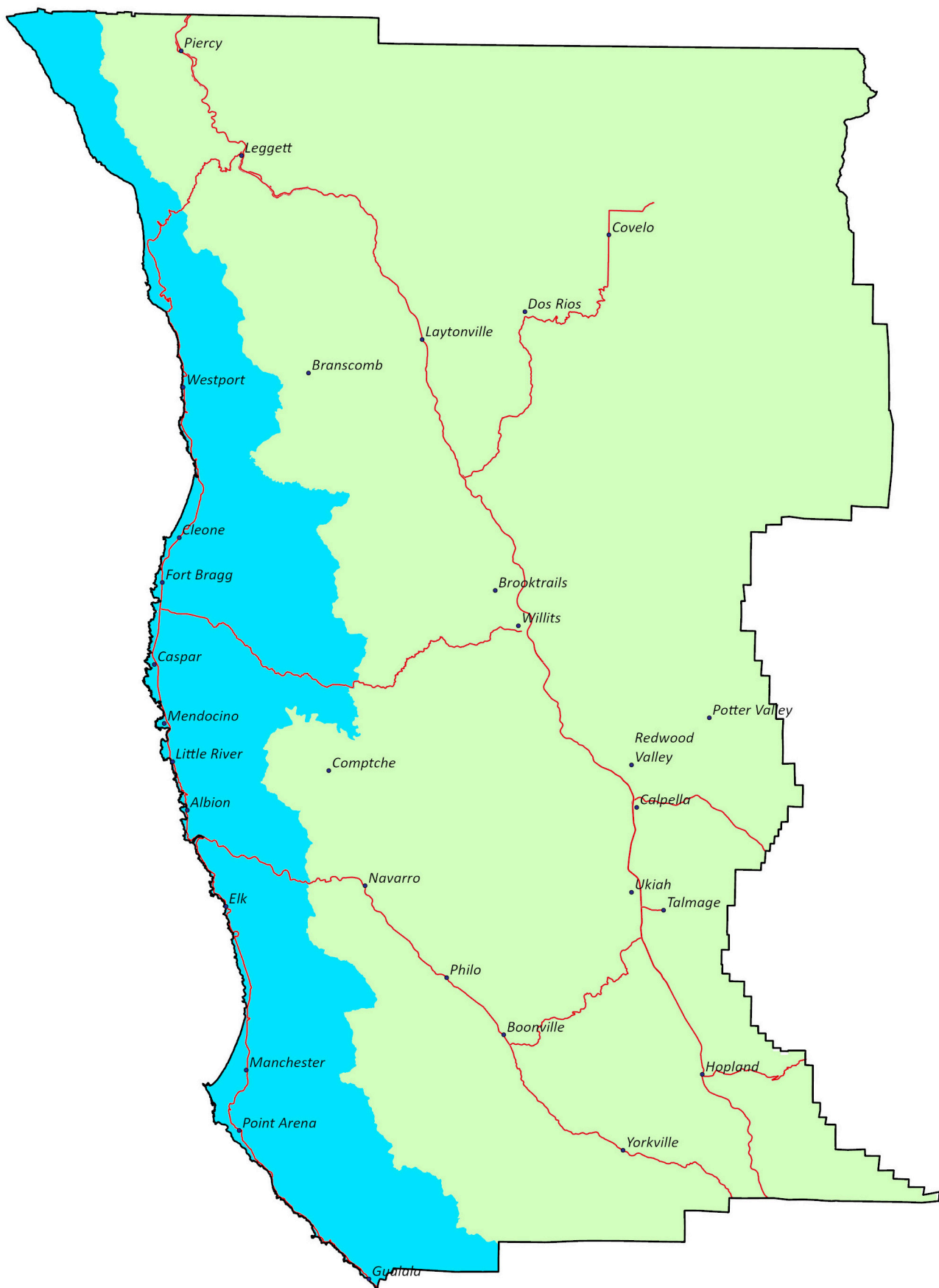
Agriculture and rural economies:

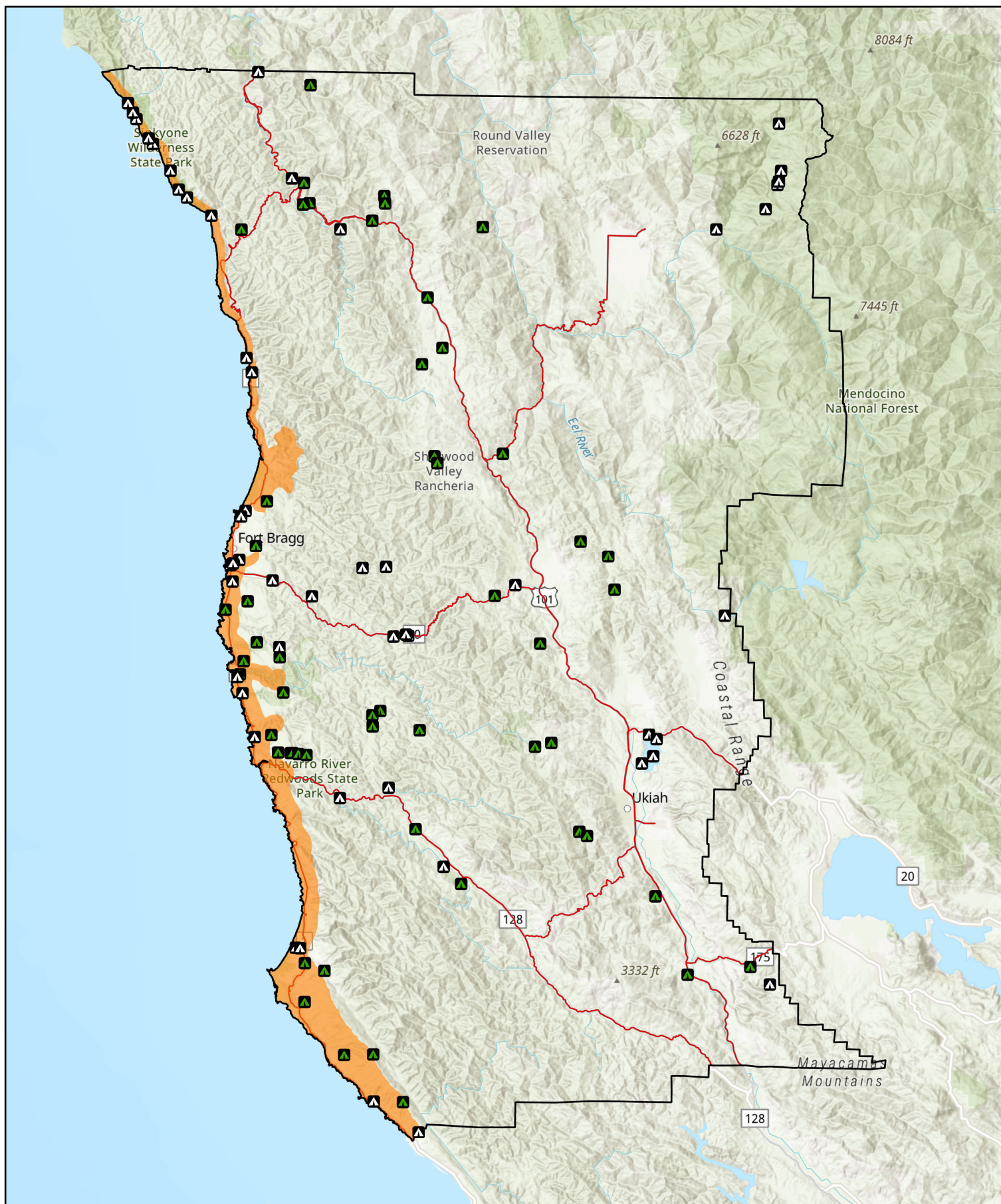
- Apple Hill Growers Association
- California Association for Local Economic Development
- California Farm Bureau Federation
- California Certified Organic Farmers
- Community Alliance with Family Farmers
- El Dorado County Farm Bureau
- El Dorado County Farm Trails
- El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce
- Visit San Benito County

Local governments:

- Inyo County Board of Supervisors
- Mendocino County Board of Supervisors
- Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors
- San Benito County Board of Supervisors
- Hardy Bullock, Fifth District Supervisor, Nevada County
- John Peschong, First District Supervisor, San Luis Obispo County
- Anaiah Kirk, Third District Supervisor, Tuolumne County







▲ Existing Campgrounds (51 facilities / ~2,415 sites)

▲ Existing HipCamp Sites (62 facilities / ~269 sites)

Coastal Zone

EXISTING CAMPING FACILITIES

