

## **Park Ranger Program FAQs**

We are providing this information to clarify questions from the public and the media regarding the County's proposal to eliminate the peace officer training requirements, status and duties of park rangers.

The County has notified affected unions and is in discussions with those who have requested to meet and confer.

Regional Parks' mission remains the same: to provide essential opportunities for people to connect with nature. We contribute to the vibrancy and well-being of our community by expanding access to recreation experiences, serving as responsible stewards of cultural and natural resources, and ensuring that our parks are clean, safe, and welcoming.

The County looks forward to continuing the conversation with the unions to provide a safe environment for our employees and our community.

### **Key points**

- Regional Parks is not eliminating park rangers but is negotiating a potential change to working conditions to eliminate the peace officer training requirements, status and duties.
- Parking and administrative citations are the primary enforcement tools rangers currently use and do not require peace officer status.
- Regional Parks has a 30% vacancy rate in ranger positions. Eliminating the current peace officer requirements for applicants would significantly accelerate recruitment and onboarding.

### **Is Regional Parks removing park rangers?**

Regional Parks is not proposing to eliminate park rangers. It is negotiating a proposal to modify the current minimum qualification that requires ranger applicants to complete a law enforcement academy.

Entry-level park ranger training is no longer available locally. Due to high costs and low enrollment, Santa Rosa Junior College in 2020 discontinued the National Park Service training academy it had hosted. When the training was available, many of the topics (i.e., firearms, arrests, felony stops, building searches, transport and booking, evidence, crime scene processing) were not duties a Sonoma County park ranger performs.

Regional Parks is working with the college to develop a new ranger certification program and other continuing education coursework consistent with the duties and services provided by county park rangers.

### **Why is Regional Parks considering modifying the ranger peace officer status?**

The primary enforcement tools rangers use are education, warnings and parking or administrative citations. These methods do not require peace officer status. Additionally, of Regional Parks 22 ranger positions, seven are currently unfilled - a 30% vacancy rate - and eliminating the pre-employment law enforcement academy requirement will remove a significant barrier for prospective applicants.

The current background investigation process typically takes four to six months and requires medical, polygraph and psychological evaluations. The background investigation requirement increases barriers for prospective employees and the length of the hiring process.

### **Would we continue to see rangers in the parks?**

Rangers will continue providing daily operational services in the parks. These include engaging with visitors, directing operations staff, collecting fees, informing visitors about rules and regulations, enforcing park rules with parking or administrative citations, operating campgrounds, providing emergency medical care, inspecting parks for cleanliness and hazards, helping with unskilled and semi-skilled maintenance tasks and delivering interpretive programs. None of these duties require peace officer status.

### **What if there is a serious crime or emergency in a park?**

Rangers routinely request law enforcement services from the Sheriff's Office, local police, fire services and emergency medical services if there is a serious crime or emergency in a park.

When enforcing park rules, regulations and laws, rangers are expected to obtain voluntary compliance. If a situation were to warrant physical detention, rangers would continue to ask local law enforcement to respond.

Additionally, with this proposal, Regional Parks is working with the Sheriff's Office to increase the law enforcement resources allocated to parks.

### **Would rangers continue to have personal safety equipment?**

Under this proposal, rangers would retain much of the gear currently available to them. For example, rangers will continue to have vests, chemical agents, flashlights and radios. Through an objective hazard-assessment process, Regional Parks is researching other appropriate training and safety tools based on the job responsibilities.

**Why is the county considering this change after a study by a county-hired consultant concluded: “A review of the selected comparable agencies demonstrated that the peace officer classification for Sonoma County Park Rangers is consistent with similarly described agencies and statutes”?**

The consultant evaluated 67 agencies with park rangers in California to assess whether more law enforcement tools and training were warranted for Sonoma County rangers. Of those, 43 agencies (65%) use rangers who are not peace officers (neither police, pc830.31b nor pc 836.5 public officer). Of the 24 comparable agencies whose rangers do have peace officer status, there was no compelling evidence to say that Sonoma County Regional Parks needed to increase law enforcement tools or training.

**Is the County proposing that rangers no longer be certified emergency medical technicians or provide emergency medical care for park visitors?**

Park rangers will continue to receive the training, certifications and equipment to provide emergency medical care for visitors. The proposal is to eliminate the current job specification requirement for probationary employees to have acquired a valid emergency medical technician basic certificate within 12 months of hire.

**Will this change affect the safety of other employees in the parks?**

No, but as is the current procedure any employee who feels unsafe performing their duties is trained to immediately remove themselves from the situation and contact their supervisor and/or call 911. Park rangers will continue to actively de-escalate situations where visitors are not complying with park rules, and they will continue to be trained and prepared to respond to medical and other emergencies.