



[Enlarge](#) By William M. Welch, USA TODAY

Coca Cola and Slater Bros. are renewing their partnership with Cuyamaca Rancho State Park in California. Corporate sponsorship in state parks is becoming more prevalent across the United States.

Examples of sponsorships



Corporate alliances help keep state parks afloat

By William M. Welch, USA TODAY

CUYAMACA RANCHO STATE PARK, Calif. — A visitor has to look closely to find it, but here, in a remote mountain forest of Southern California, is a sign of what's to come for state parks across the USA: Corporate logos.

From California to New York, states are turning to corporations for financial backing as recession and budget woes prompt cuts in public dollars to maintain parks.

"In tough times, you should never be complacent," says Ruth Coleman, California state parks director. "We have found corporations are very eager and willing to help."

California parks have received nearly \$6 million from corporate sponsorship programs over the past three years, she says. That's small compared with a \$300 million operating budget, but in a system where hours of operation have been cut and park workers put on three unpaid furlough days a month, every dollar is important.

"I wouldn't want to give the impression that this is the solution, but it's definitely a great way to make the parks better," she says.

Most states are still in the early stages, testing public reaction to the idea and seeking potential sponsors, says Philip McKnelly, executive director of the National Association of State Park Directors. He says "extremely harsh budget times" have made parks and recreation programs among the first to fall under the budget ax and left officials with few options to avoid closing parks.

"It's something that a lot of states are looking into now," McKnelly says. "If it's what it takes to keep parks open, I guess it would be a good thing."

The largest corporate sponsorship program in California parks is revealed here by a small set of corporate logos on an informational sign at this vast preserve in the Laguna Mountains 50 miles east of San Diego. It credits Coca-Cola and Slater Bros., a supermarket chain, for a program that Coleman says has provided \$650,000 to plant trees where forests were charred by wildfires.

Helping parks is good business, says Terence Fitch, vice president and general manager for Coca-Cola Enterprises' operations in Western states.

In a public campaign last year, Coke donated \$1 for every \$10 in product sold at participating retailers, and the supermarket chain solicited \$1 contributions from customers. Coke and the grocery chain have committed to an additional \$550,000 for state beaches this year, Coleman says.



“We entered into this not knowing how consumers would react,” Fitch says. “They’ve been very supportive.”

Arranging partnerships

Matching parks with appropriate corporate donors is a growing business, too. Government Solutions Group, a Pasadena, Calif., agency, brokered the partnership here and is doing so for other states, CEO Shari Boyer says.

It helped arrange a partnership in New York in which the Nestlé Juicy Juice brand promised to spend \$350,000 over two years building playgrounds at seven state parks. One opened in April at East River State Park in Brooklyn. The company’s contribution is noted in playground signs.

“Because of budget crises, states are beginning to see they have some assets they probably can monetize,” Boyer says.

Big states have attracted the most corporate help for parks, she says, but smaller states are also beginning to do so. Corporations are interested, she says, because state parks provide an audience through more than 700 million visits annually.

Georgia has hired an agency to help it find corporate sponsors for its parks, says Kim Hatcher, public affairs coordinator for Georgia state parks. She says it was a response to a legislative directive that the parks find ways to become more self-sustaining, and a 40% budget cut.

“We’ve been reassuring people we will not rename any parks,” she says. “We might have a picnic shelter that has a small, tasteful sign that says brought to you by X company.”

In Virginia, state parks have received an estimated \$5 million in corporate contributions over the past five years, says Joe Elton, state parks director. Among the big contributors has been the electric power company Dominion, which has sponsored touch-screen information kiosks at state parks, he says.



Enlarge By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

A kiosk with a corporate-sponsored touch-screen computer provides maps and trail guides to visitors at Leesylvania State Park in Virginia.

Exploring ideas

In Washington state, parks spokeswoman Virginia Painter says officials are studying California’s program but are moving cautiously because of concerns about potential public backlash.

“We’ve learned from our public they don’t like naming natural areas after corporations,” she says. “We’ve explored the possibilities of naming buildings within parks.”

Coleman says California acknowledges contributions in “carefully designed and tasteful donor recognition” labels.

The companies are free to advertise their connection, but Coleman says there’s no chance the state will rename a beach or park for a company or brand, even though sporting arenas and concert venues commonly raise money by selling their names. Most state parks don’t get the TV coverage that makes stadium naming rights valuable advertising, she says, and companies could risk a public backlash by renaming a public park.

“I don’t think you’ll ever see a park named after a company,” she says. “I don’t think the value is there for them. ... Park names are kind of sacred.”