

GOP Budget Prioritizes County Payments



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Rep. Greg Walden

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Glenn Vaagen

BEND, OR -- The federal budget proposal released Monday evening by House Republicans would make county timber payments a priority. Representative Greg Walden, joined by the rest of the Oregon House delegation, said the effort to fund these payments is far from over, but inclusion in the budget is an important first step.

"The Budget Committee has acknowledged in these very difficult and lean economic times that county timber payments are an important lifeline for rural forested communities. This is a small but very important first step toward keeping the federal government's commitment to rural Oregon. We have a lot of work before us in the House and Senate and I look forward to our delegation continuing our bipartisan outreach across Capitol Hill to maintain support for forested communities throughout the federal budget process."

Walden added that funding county payments in FY 2012 would ensure rural counties have the resources to provide essential services like emergency services, health care, and schools while Congress works to find long-term funding solutions for timber dependent communities.

Here is the letter, sent by the Oregon House delegation, in its entirety:

March 22, 2011

Dear Chairman Ryan and Ranking Member Van Hollen:

We request your assistance as we work with our rural counties to identify solutions to extend and fund the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 ("SRS," P.L. 94-565) in FY 2012 and beyond. Furthermore, we request that the House Budget Committee accommodate this reauthorization in its FY 2012 House Budget Resolution. This is an important issue impacting jobs and the funding of schools and emergency services in our rural counties.

We understand well the current budgetary climate and the need to reduce deficit spending, and support offsetting a long-term reauthorization of SRS. Furthermore, we appreciate your willingness to work with us and the authorizing committees in the coming months to help identify legitimate offsets that sustainably fund this important rural priority without adding to the growing federal deficit.

With the establishment of the National Forest System between 1891 and 1911 by Congressional action and Presidential Proclamation, hundreds of millions of forestland acres throughout the United States were set aside

in perpetuity and removed from further settlement. These new forest reserves, which were to be managed by the U.S. Forest Service, in many cases consumed between 65 to 90 percent of the land in rural western, southeastern and southern counties. Setting aside large blocks of public lands and the ongoing acquisition of large tracks of private forestlands since have diminished the potential tax base and ability for the counties to generate economic activity.

Congress in 1908 and subsequently in 1913 acknowledged the enormous collective impact these actions had on counties and their ability to fund essential services, including the education of rural school children, the maintenance of rural roads and infrastructure, and the provision of emergency services. President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law the Twenty-five Percent Fund Act of 1908 (16 USC. 500) and in 1913 amendments were made to the Weeks Act, which created a revenue sharing mechanism specifying that 25 percent of all revenues generated from the multiple-use management of our national forests would be shared with the counties for "the benefit of the public schools and public roads in the county or counties in which such national forests are situated". Through this action, Congress committed to a long-term partnership referred to by many as a "compact" and recognized as a fundamental obligation of the federal government in exchange for establishing the National Forest System.

The intent of Congress that our national forests be managed in a sustained multiple-use manner to provide revenues for local counties and the federal treasury in perpetuity worked well from 1908 until about 1986. From 1986 to the present, due to reduced active management of our federal forests and increased protections for species on federal lands, these revenues dropped precipitously (as much as 99 percent in some counties and on average 70 percent nationwide).

Congress responded by passing the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act in 2000. In many rural counties once dependent on timber revenue, these payments are the lifeblood of local schools and community essential services. The legislation also created highly successful "Resource Advisory Committees," which have brought polarized groups together to conduct hundreds of restoration projects on national forests across the country without being litigated or appealed.

In 2007, Congress reauthorized this important law and extended SRS payments for one year to help rural counties and schools avert a major financial crisis. In October 2008, Congress reauthorized the SRS legislation for four years as part of H.R. 1424, the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008. The reauthorization provided rural counties with four years of payments on a declining scale for fiscal years 2008-2011.

While the four-year reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act was a rare legislative accomplishment that helped preserve and create jobs across America, rural counties are again facing a budgetary cliff after they receive the final SRS payment in FY 2011. In response to this ongoing issue, we need a meaningful and long-term solution that will help ensure rural communities have the resources they need to provide basic county services.

Congress made a promise to these counties more than 100 years ago and we intend to do all that we can to make sure Congress honors its commitment. Accommodating the reauthorization of the SRS, while showing that it will be offset by the relevant authorizing committees in the FY 2012 House Budget Resolution, will go a long way in demonstrating Congress's commitment and responsibility to the economic security and sustainability of our rural counties.

Thank you for your attention and consideration to this important issue. We look forward to working with you and the appropriate authorizing committees to develop a plan for reauthorizing the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act.

Sincerely,

Greg Walden Peter DeFazio Kurt Schrader
Member of Congress Member of Congress Member of Congress

Earl Blumenauer David Wu
Member of Congress Member of Congress