NACo, National Forest Counties & Schools Coalition applaud House passage of healthy forests bill

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The National Association of Counties (NACo) and the National Forest Counties & Schools Coalition today applauded the U.S. House of Representatives for passing legislation that would restore critical funding by extending the Secure Rural Schools program.

By a bipartisan vote of 244-173, the House passed H.R. 1526, the Restoring Healthy Forests for Healthy Communities Act. The bill renews the federal government’s commitment to manage federal forests for the benefit of counties impacted by federal forestland, improves forest health and helps prevent catastrophic wildfires.

“NACo and county leaders thank the members of the House of Representatives who voted to support enactment of a modern revenue sharing program that would ensure that students receive essential education services and that rural communities have funding for roads, conservation projects, search and rescue missions and fire prevention programs,” said Matt Chase, NACo executive director.

Paul J. Pearce, president of the National Forest Counties & Schools Coalition, said the bill is the most far reaching forest management bill in decades.

“We are excited that Congress has recognized the dismal state of our national forests which is affecting all uses from recreation to wildlife habitat to timber management as well as the extreme fire danger due to lack of management and the economic devastation visited upon our communities,” Pearce said. “We look forward to working with the Senate to restore the health of our national forest and the counties which are the gateways to them.”

Specifically, the legislation would:

- reestablish the priority of actively managing our forests and promote responsible timber production on Forest Service commercial timber land
- improve forest health and prevent catastrophic wildfires by allowing significant state

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• and local involvement
• improve forest management by establishing Good Neighbor Authority, which allows state and federal authorities to work together on fire mitigation efforts even when project areas cross ownership boundaries, and
• allow for a short-term extension of Secure Rural Schools payments to rural counties and schools.

The expiration of the Secure Rural Schools program in 2012 would create dramatic budgetary shortfalls if Congress fails to renew the longstanding federal obligation to county governments.

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The Partnership for Rural America campaign, an initiative of the National Forest Counties & Schools Coalition, works with Congress and other interested parties for enacted legislation that mandates active forest management to restore resiliency and sustainable revenue generation to our federal forest lands; which includes bridge funding for rural forested counties and schools while these reforms are implemented by the U.S. Forest Service and on “Oregon and California Grant Land (O&C)” forests by the Bureau of Land Management.

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation’s 3,069 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public’s understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org.