



June 21, 2017

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
United States House of Representatives
130 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Westerman:

On behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo) the only organization representing the nation's 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs, and the Western Interstate Region (WIR), we write to express support for H.R. 2936, the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017. Thank you for your leadership in introducing legislation to promote the active management of our nation's federal lands and forests, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and promote collaborative approaches to address natural resource management challenges.

The legislation will improve the health and wellbeing of forest lands and forest communities by: promoting collaboration and streamlining regulations for forest health projects, protecting communities through wildfire risk reduction, improving flexibility and fairness in forest revenue sharing, and delegating the authority for Resource Advisory Committees (RAC) appointments.

Promoting Collaboration and Streamlining Regulations for Forest Health Projects

Counties believe that active management of federal lands and forests must be done in a sustainable manner that ensures the health of our federal lands for generations to come. One way to help ensure a balanced approach to address natural resource management challenges is by promoting locally driven collaborative processes that promote consensus driven decision making. Counties across the United States have engaged in collaborative efforts to address their natural resources challenges. By bringing a broad cross-section of local stakeholders into collaborative processes, counties, industry, outdoorsmen, conservationists and federal and state land managers have built consensus on some of the most complex natural resource management challenges.

By authorizing limited and reasonable categorical exclusions for projects that improve forest health and have been developed through consensus based collaborative processes, H.R. 2936 builds upon these successes and provides additional tools to help ensure that collaborative efforts continue to work, accelerate and expand. Streamlining the regulatory review of proposed forestry projects will increase project implementation and the number of acres that are treated.

Protecting Communities through Wildfire Risk Reduction

For the 26 percent of counties across the United States that are home to federal forest lands, the health of our national forests has a direct impact on the health and safety of county residents. Healthy forests

are less prone to disease, insect infestation, and wildfire. While the causes of catastrophic wildfire are complex, the *status quo* of inaction has exacerbated present forest conditions, which now present a great risk to both communities and the environment. Your legislation would help to correct this by requiring the costs and benefits of a proposed forest project be weighed against the costs and benefits of doing nothing to address wildfire threats, disease and insect infestation, and their impacts on local water supply and wildlife habitat.

Provisions of the legislation expediting regulatory analysis for timber salvage after major wildfires are also crucial, and will provide the Forest Service with the revenue it needs to execute critical and time-sensitive post-fire reforestation work.

Providing Flexibility and Equitable Sharing of Forest Revenues

In addition to improving forest health and reducing wildfire risk for forest communities, increased active management will generate more revenue for the federal treasury and critical services provided by counties, and promote job creation and economic growth in counties across the nation. According to the American Forest and Paper Association, forest products industries account for 4% of U.S. manufacturing GDP and over \$50 billion annually in wages for approximately 900,000 employees.¹ These jobs provide a direct economic impact to many rural and forest counties across the country.

The growth in stewardship contracting in recent years has shown that a market-driven approach to forest management projects can work to achieve both forest management goals and increased forest production. Counties support and are active partners in stewardship contracting initiatives across the United States. NACo and WIR support provisions of H.R. 2936 that authorize the equitable sharing of stewardship contracting revenues with counties consistent with historic practices. Forest revenue sharing payments support critical county services such as transportation infrastructure and education. America's counties look forward to working with Congress to further strengthen forest revenue sharing between counties and the federal government.

Since 2000, due to sharp declines in forest revenues, the federal government has provided payments to forest counties through the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program. The SRS program provides a critical safety-net for forest counties impacted by declines in forest production and the loss of forest jobs and it will continue to be a critical program until the declines in forest production can be fully addressed. H.R. 2936 reforms Title III of SRS that provide much needed flexibility for counties to use a portion of SRS funding to support law enforcement patrols and ensure county first-responders have the equipment and training they need to provide high-quality emergency services on forest service land to county residents and the millions of public lands visitors each year.

Delegating the Authority for Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) Appointments

Finally, counties support legislation to ensure rural counties can actively coordinate with federal agencies through flexibility in RAC membership and appointments. NACo and WIR support allowing the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and U.S. Secretary of the Interior to delegate the authority for appointing RAC members to agency leaders, such as Regional Foresters or Bureau of Land Management State Directors. Counties should be included in the development and implementation of public lands

¹ "American Forest and Paper Association: Our Industry. Economic Impact." Retrieved June 20, 2017 from: <http://www.afandpa.org/our-industry/economic-impact>

management plans, and RACs allow county leaders to actively participate in this process. Your legislation would allow the Secretary to delegate RAC appointment authority, and ensure locally-driven efforts to better manage federal lands can begin in a timely manner.

NACo and WIR stand ready to work with you to promote locally supported, consensus-driven solutions to address management challenges, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, and increase economic activity on our federal lands. NACo and WIR encourage swift passage of the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Matthew D. Chase". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Matthew" being more prominent than the last name "Chase".

Matthew D. Chase
Executive Director
National Association of Counties

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Joel E. Bousman". The signature is cursive and elegant, with the first name "Joel" and last name "Bousman" clearly visible.

Joel Bousman
President
Western Interstate Region