



National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition

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April 14, 2020

Douglas Hoelscher
Director of Intergovernmental Affairs
Executive Office of the President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

By Email and Regular Mail
Douglas.L.Hoelscher@who.eop.gov

Re: S. 1643 and Coronavirus Economic Recovery Legislation

Dear Mr. Hoelscher:

The COVID-19 national emergency highlights the need to enact S. 1643, the bipartisan Forest Management for Rural Stability Act, which would permanently stabilize local government funding provided by the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS). Rural counties and schools, struggling financially for decades, have had their budgets decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic. With already inadequate funding and now additional demands on their resources, rural communities and counties are at the breaking point. S. 1643 would help stabilize funding for roads, bridges, schools, law enforcement and other essential county services, such as public health programs. We are writing to request support from President Trump for the inclusion of S. 1643 in coronavirus economic recovery legislation now being considered.

Rural communities where the federal government owns much of the land (that does not pay local property taxes) have been suffering for more than 20 years, with continuously declining revenues based on federal land ownership, leaving such communities ill prepared to deal with crises like the current pandemic. S. 1643 would stabilize this critical source of funding. President Trump and Speaker Pelosi have both signaled that legislation to support economic recovery would focus in part on infrastructure. S. 1643 is appropriate for inclusion, since S. 1643 is largely focused on payments to local governments for use on roads, bridges and related infrastructure, as well as schools.

For nearly 100 years, counties with public forestlands received federal support in the form of timber and other natural resource receipts sharing payments. Roads and related infrastructure were a statutorily designated use for those payments. Most recently, federal support has come through the SRS program, originally enacted in 2000 and reauthorized six times since then. SRS continued to provide funds for

roads and schools, as well as essential county services, such as public health programs, but there have been annual decreases that have resulted in payments about half the level provided 20 years ago, and much less than half the levels provided historically from natural resource receipts. The need to repeatedly reauthorize SRS has left communities unable to plan and project revenues. SRS expires again at the end of FY2020 and the ability of communities to support safe roads and bridges, schools, public health and other essential services will again be in serious doubt.

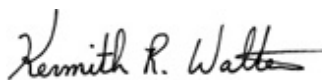
It is time to provide much-needed certainty to the rural communities reliant on public lands. S. 1643 ends the financial rollercoaster by creating a permanent endowment fund to provide reliable funding for county roads and bridges, schools, public health and other essential services, ending the need for repeated SRS appropriations:

- Along with an initial, substantial appropriation to seed the new endowment fund (Fund), commercial receipts generated on National Forests, National Wildlife Refuge Revenue Sharing lands, and O&C lands (managed by the BLM) would be deposited annually into the Fund and held in separate accounts within the Fund.
- Earnings from the Fund's investments would finance payments to counties and schools.
- Payments would have a baseline of no less than FY2017 SRS and RRS payment levels.
- Congress would charter a new, independent non-profit corporation with fiduciary obligations to manage the Fund following strict statutory guidelines.

Since its passage in 2000, Federal Government has spent more on SRS payments than will be required to fund S.1643. More importantly, however, there will be no more requirement for the Federal Government to prop up the annual SRS payments to rural schools and counties, and no more financial roller coaster or repeated pilgrimages to Washington by schools and Counties seeking reauthorization of SRS. S. 1643 is a permanent solution to the SRS conundrum.

S.1643 has widespread, bipartisan support in Congress and by Counties and schools across our nation. We ask President Trump to give it his full support to S. 1643 as part of any coronavirus economic legislation he considers.

Very truly yours,



Kermith Walters, President
National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition
Superintendent of Education
Siskiyou County Office of Education