

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0301

March 14, 2016

The Honorable Hal Rogers
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
H-305, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
1016 Longworth HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Lowey,

As the Appropriations Committee begins its work to set fiscal priorities for FY 2017, we urge you to work in a bipartisan, bicameral way to ensure resources for the Secure Rural Schools and Self-Determination (SRS) program for fiscal year (FY) 2016 and beyond. SRS payments provide critical revenues to more than 775 rural counties and 4,400 schools throughout the country.

As you may know, when the National Forest System was established in 1891 by Congressional action and by Presidential Proclamation in 1911, hundreds of millions of acres of forestland throughout the country were set aside to be managed by the U.S. Forest Service. In many cases, massive swaths of public lands consume between 65 and 90 percent of the total land in certain rural counties. The initial allotment of land, along with the continued acquisition of large tracts of federal land since, has greatly diminished the potential tax base and ability for rural counties to generate economic activity.

Historically, 25 percent of all timber harvest revenues went to counties with significant National Forest Lands within their borders to be used for education, roads and to offset property tax losses. Specifically, President Theodore Roosevelt signed legislation into law in 1908 (16 USC.500) which specified 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.”

This revenue sharing mechanism worked well for more than 70 years until a reduction of active management of our federal forests dropped revenues as much as 99 percent in some counties and on average 70 percent nationwide. Timber harvests are down nearly 80 percent over the last 30 years. According to the National Association of Counties, “During the 1980s, national policies substantially diminished the revenue-generating activity permitted in these forests. The resulting steep decline in timber sales decreased the revenues that rural counties and school districts received from forest management activities.”

In FY 2014, SRS payments totaled \$285 million. While Congress retroactively reauthorized SRS payments for FY 2014 and 2015 on April 16, 2015, and payments will be made in calendar year 2016, counties and schools are once again facing the possibility of significant budget shortfalls. To date, SRS has not been reauthorized for FY 2016 or beyond.

This pending uncertainty makes it nearly impossible for local governments to plan their budgets. SRS payments are critically important to offset the decline in timber harvest revenues until the federal government resumes a forward-thinking, active management strategy in our nation's forests. Failing to act to fulfill this long-standing obligation will leave counties and schools across the country without the important resources they need to serve their populations.

Accordingly, we ask that you work with the relevant authorizing committees and include a place holder for SRS.

We recognize the challenges of the current fiscal environment and thank you for your effort and dutiful consideration of appropriations priorities. We thank you for your consideration of this request, and for your leadership on the committee.

Sincerely,



Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.
Member of Congress



Peter DeFazio
Member of Congress



Dan Benishek, M.D.
Member of Congress



Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress



Suzan DelBene
Member of Congress



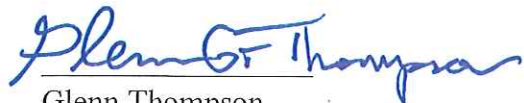
Scott Tipton
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Michelle Lujan Grisham
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Ann Kirkpatrick
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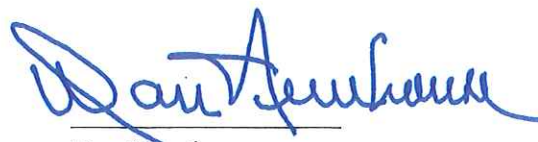
Glenn Thompson
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Jim Costa
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Dan Newhouse
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Kristi Noem
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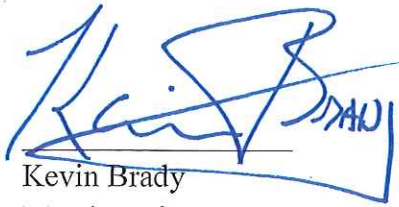
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