

Statement of the Honorable Wally Herger on the need to extend the Secure Rural Schools and
Community Self-Determination Act of 2000

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Prepared text

I'd like to thank the gentlemen from Oregon - Mr. DeFazio and Mr. Walden - for their leadership on this issue. Like the both of you, I have a heavily forested district, and I understand very clearly the challenges that our rural communities face because of such a large federal presence in our area.

Many of our fellow citizens, and maybe even some of the members of this body, do not realize that the presence of federal lands places a significant burden on nearby communities. So I'm pleased to join you tonight to shine the light on that fact, and remind our colleagues that the "Secure Rural Schools" program - one of the most important pieces of rural legislation that Congress has passed in recent years - has expired and is in need of reauthorization.

In my district, as well as in many others, school boards, county officials, and sheriff's departments are currently in "crisis mode." Siskiyou County - one of the largest in my district - is looking at a *91 percent* loss in school funding. In Tehama County, library hours, music, art, and physical education classes will all be cut.

And as my friends from Oregon are aware, this crisis extends well beyond education. County road safety programs will be decimated as well. Sheriff departments will also bear the brunt of these cuts. In total, eight of my 10 counties are experiencing drastic budget declines because Congress has not extended the "Secure Rural Schools" program.

Perhaps what is most important to point out to our friends who represent urban areas is that this crisis is not the fault of rural counties. Quite the contrary - it is the fault of federal policies that are out of their control, specifically the unfair burden that federal landholdings place on rural communities and the failure of Congress to address that burden by extending the Secure Rural Schools program.

In my home state of California, *close to half* of the land is owned by the federal government. In my district that number is even higher. In one of my counties *nearly ninety percent* of the land is under federal ownership.

This large federal presence has placed the counties I represent at a severe economic disadvantage. Acreage that would normally be privately owned, and therefore generating tax revenue to help fund essential local services, is instead locked away by the federal government.

President Teddy Roosevelt and our predecessors who served in the 60th Congress recognized this problem and addressed it with a "promise" - which was enshrined into law in 1908 - that the federal government would pay its fair share of local costs by sending a percentage of national forest revenues to the counties that are home to federal lands. This "promise" acknowledged that the rural counties we represent would not be able to fund vital services like

rural education, road maintenance, and emergency care as long as enormous tracts of land within their boundaries were locked away under federal control.

We need to be very clear about the nature of the "promise" that was struck between Congress and rural forested counties. These funds were not designed to be a handout; and they are not part of any federally sponsored "rural development" program. They are an obligation. They are part of a compact between the federal government and the people of rural America in recognition of the difficulties created by large federal landownership. This compact must be honored by the 110th Congress.

The rural counties I represent - and I know this is true in other areas throughout the West - have sacrificed a lot playing host to America's National Forests. I don't think it's too much to ask for this Congress to set aside a fraction of our \$2.9 trillion budget in order to keep our word to rural America. We need to act immediately to extend the 'Secure Rural Schools' safety net so our rural counties can get out of "crisis mode" and then we can all get back to working on a long term solution to our forest health problems.

Again, I'd like to thank my colleagues here tonight for their efforts to extend the Secure Rural Schools program. I am committed to work with you until we are successful; and I ask other Members of the House to recognize the incredible hardships that will result if this legislation is not renewed. I yield back the balance of my time.

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