

JAIME HERRERA BEUTLER  
3RD DISTRICT, SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
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Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515-1602

□ 1107 LONGWORTH HOB  
WASHINGTON D.C. 20515  
(202) 225-3536

□ GENERAL O.O. HOWARD HOUSE  
750 ANDERSON STREET, SUITE B  
VANCOUVER, WA 98661  
(360) 695-6292

WWW.JHB.HOUSE.GOV

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Sonny Perdue, Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
219A Whitten Building  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Tony Tooke, Chief  
US Forest Service  
4 Yates Building  
201 Fourteen Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20505

Dear Secretary Perdue and Chief Tooke,

I write to ask that the administration take immediate steps that move us toward responsible, active forest management to alleviate the funding crisis that is plaguing rural communities across America. Our National Forests are full of the renewable resources necessary to meet their needs in perpetuity if responsibly managed. It is time to stop acting as if we are resource poor when we are not.

Unfortunately, despite concerted efforts in Congress, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act (SRS program) has not yet been reauthorized, leaving our counties with nowhere to turn. The need for this legislation is great, but I must also note that while this has become a vital program for over 700 counties in 41 states, it was only ever intended as a temporary, stop-gap measure until the federal government could reform its policies and approach, at an agency-wide level, to restore sustainable levels of management to our national forests. Now is the time to make those critical reforms.

As you know, federally owned lands cannot be taxed by state or local government. This poses a challenge to local governments across the nation, particularly in states in which the federal government is a significant land owner. In fact, the fear of losing the funds that are essential to providing basic services to their communities is the very reason that the creation of our National Forests was so controversial to the people of that day. To address the challenge posed by federal ownership of National Forests, Congress in 1908 allowed that 25% of gross timber sale receipts would be paid to counties that have national forests. This was a successful answer to the challenge for the next 80 years. However, starting in the 1990's we saw those early fears become a well-founded reality. Revenues from timber sales declined dramatically – in some areas by more than 90% - due almost solely to failed federal forest policies and agency paralyzation. The loss of these revenues and the strain this placed on local governments to fund law enforcement, education, transportation infrastructure and forest fire mitigation eventually led Congress to create the SRS Program.

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As a program that requires congressional renewal that usually comes at the 11th hour, the SRS program leaves forested counties in a constant state of instability, uncertainty, and financial crisis. For instance, this school year, nine million rural students are returning to school with fewer teachers and reduced educational opportunities than they had the previous year. This outcome is hardly unavoidable and entirely unacceptable.

The latest funding crisis within our rural communities, as well as the wildfire devastation throughout the western United States, underscores the need for this agency to regain its focus. In the previous 25 years we have seen a cultural change in the US Forest Service that is to the detriment of the people it should serve, and even to the agency itself. I have seen this first hand in my own district. In spite of strong local and state support for an equal value land exchange between the Gifford Pinchot National Forest and the Washington Department of Natural Resources that would result in a state-owned Community Forest to benefit Skamania County—a county with less than 3% of their land base available for taxation to fund critical services—the agency was unequivocal in their refusal to even consider the proposal. It is no wonder that many of our rural residents now regret the formation of our National Forests and speak of non-federal management or ownership of these assets.

The U.S. Forest Service does not need new legislation from Congress to meet the Allowable Sale Quantity levels of harvest within its federal forests. However, the agency has failed to meet these previously authorized, sustainable harvest quantities by responding to activist, anti-rural litigation with resignation; allowing its mission to maintain healthy federal forests to become diluted by too many non-critical efforts; and by leaving itself in a state of perpetual constant borrowing from forest management accounts to react to the wildfires that have scorched so much forest, property and wildlife in large part due to its own inaction.

It is possible to reverse this failure. In 1907 when the National Forests were formed, the father of the USFS, Gifford Pinchot, pledged that “It is a sure and steady income, because the resources of National Forests are used in such a way that they keep coming without a break”. While I will not let up in my efforts to renew SRS in the 115th Congress, I implore you to remember the first Chief’s promise and use the tools available to the Administration, including a much-needed rebuilding of forestry staff, to increase responsible harvests. Only then can we provide a sound and sustainable revenue stream for forest counties and schools, promote healthier fire resilient forests that are not as prone to infestation and disease, strengthen rural economies, and generate new jobs.

I stand ready to partner with you in this effort, and look forward to your response and assistance.

Sincerely,



Jaime Herrera Beutler  
Member of Congress