Written statement of

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On behalf of the National Association of Counties

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Chair Thompson, Subcommittee Chair Newhouse, Ranking Member Salinas and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding today's hearing examining how counties and federal partners can work together to enhance the management of the national forest system, and for inviting me to testify on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo). NACo represents America's 3,069 county governments, which deliver essential services to more than 300 million residents every day. As intergovernmental partners, counties implement federal policy on the ground and serve as the primary interface between federal land management agencies and the communities most directly affected by their decisions.

My name is Ned Coe and I serve as a member of the Modoc County Board of Supervisors, California and as Second Vice President of NACo's Western Interstate Region (WIR), which represents county governments across 17 western states. Modoc County is the third least-populated county in California, with 8,700 residents across 4,203 square miles, or nearly 2.7 million acres, 1.7 million of which is federally owned. I am also a lifelong beef cattle rancher in far northern California. For 45 years, I have worked with the California Farm Bureau, including the last 25 years as a regional field representative serving county bureaus across the northern quarter of the state, with a focus on public lands, water resources, livestock and predator management.

Federal partnership matters and works best when local and federal partners are aligned and coordinate often to meet the needs of residents and the national forests they depend on. The Modoc County experience offers a concrete model for how forest management programs, including those funded through the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS), can deliver measurable results when federal agencies and county governments work together in earnest.

This testimony will highlight what a genuine federal-county coordination looks like in practice, what makes that coordination possible and the three roles county governments play in National Forest System management: as the fiscal foundation that makes local partnerships possible, as operational partners who execute on-the-ground work alongside federal agencies, and as intergovernmental partners whose coordination with the Forest Service produces outcomes neither party could achieve alone.

<u>Counties as Fiscal Partners</u>

The Federal Land Payment Framework

National forest lands encompass two-thirds of Modoc County's total landscape. Unlike private land, federally owned acreage generates no property tax revenue for the county governments responsible for maintaining roads, funding schools and delivering emergency services within and adjacent to those lands. For counties like Modoc, where 1.7 million of 2.7 million acres are federally owned and therefore nontaxable, federal payment programs are not a discretionary benefit. They are a structural necessity.

The SRS Act provides the primary mechanism through which Congress fulfills its fiscal obligation to these communities. SRS payments flow directly to county governments and are used for a wide range of essential services, including road maintenance, public school support, search and rescue operations and the local administrative capacity that makes federal-county partnerships possible in the first place. Counties in the West manage landscapes on behalf of the entire nation. Predictable, adequate SRS funding is the minimum necessary for counties to fulfill their mandated responsibilities alongside federal land management agencies.

Congress most recently reauthorized SRS through the end of FY 2026, with final payments reaching counties in spring 2027. Absent further action, more than 700 timber-dependent counties will again face significant budgetary shortfalls. NACo urges Congress to enact a long-term or permanent reauthorization of SRS before the program lapses again. Counties cannot plan, hire or build lasting partnerships on a year-to-year basis. All three SRS titles serve distinct and essential functions: Title I funds county roads and schools; Title II supports county-led resource advisory committees and on-the-ground forest management projects; and Title III funds county road maintenance and other essential services directly tied to national forest management. Full and stable funding for all three titles is essential to the federal-county partnership this Subcommittee is examining today.

What Stable Funding Looks Like: The Modoc RAC and UCCE

The Modoc County Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) is a direct product of SRS Title II and a concrete example of what stable federal funding makes possible at the local level. The RAC reviews and recommends projects funded through Title II mechanisms, bringing together county government, federal agencies, ranchers, environmental interests and other stakeholders to direct resources toward on-the-ground priorities.

The RAC has supported projects with lasting impact, including development of wells and retention basins that serve both livestock grazing operations and emergency fire suppression, as well as fuels reduction and habitat restoration work that improves long-term forest resilience. The University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) serves as a consistent partner in this process, providing technical expertise and institutional continuity that strengthens the RAC's recommendations.

The fiscal and operational dimensions of the federal-county relationship are inseparable. The RAC does not function without SRS Title II funding. The workforce partnerships described in the next section do not scale without the institutional relationships the RAC cultivates. Stable federal payments are the foundation on which every other form of county-federal coordination is built.

Counties as Operational Partners

Modoc County does not simply receive federal land management decisions; it helps execute them. The two case studies below illustrate what operational partnership looks like in practice, viewed through two distinct lenses – conservation outcomes and workforce capacity.

Case Study 1: Devil’s Garden Wild Horse Territory

The management of the Devil’s Garden Wild Horse Territory stands as one of the most consequential conservation achievements in recent Modoc County history and a direct product of county-federal coordination.

Devil’s Garden is the only wild horse unit managed exclusively by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). A decade ago, the wild horse population had surged to 10 times the maximum Appropriate Management Level (AML) for the territory. Overgrazing by horses was severely degrading rangeland and displacing livestock operations. As of fall 2025, through sustained and coordinated management, the territory’s population returned to its designated AML of 206 to 402 horses — the first time the territory has been within its legal AML in 55 years, since the passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. Since 2016, the Modoc National Forest has gathered and placed more than 4,000 horses for adoption.

To support this effort and build public goodwill around responsible management, Modoc County and UCCE partnered with the Forest Service to create the Devil’s Garden Colt Challenge. Each year, 25 to 30 youth from 4-H and FFA programs across California, as well as Lake and Klamath counties in Oregon, receive a Forest Service colt, train it and compete in a dedicated horse show at the Modoc County Fair. Participants gain full ownership of their animal upon completion. The program transforms what could be a politically contentious management challenge into a youth development opportunity with broad community support.

Case Study 2: The Modoc Shared Stewardship Program

Federal staffing vacancies are among the most persistent barriers to effective public lands management across the West. The Modoc Shared Stewardship Program was created specifically to solve that problem.

This innovative agreement pairs the Modoc County Farm Bureau, the Modoc National Forest and UCCE Modoc in a workforce pipeline that delivers qualified, trained personnel directly to the Forest Service. The structure operates as follows:

1. UCCE Modoc recruits and provides comprehensive training for short-term employees.

2. The Modoc County Farm Bureau serves as the formal employer of record for those individuals.

3. The USFS gains immediate, qualified operational capacity without navigating federal hiring timelines.

The program has now been operational for five years. In the most recent field season, it employed 43 workers who logged more than 18,000 hours on the ground. That workforce delivered measurable results:

- **Infrastructure:** More than 700 miles of trail and road maintenance, off-highway vehicle program maintenance and hazard tree removal

- **Resource management:** Vacant grazing allotment surveys, vegetation and fuels management, timber sale preparation and field studies

- **Regulatory compliance:** Archaeology surveys, hydrology and botany studies, wildlife surveys and NEPA document preparation, including specialist surveys for the Wild Horse Environmental Assessment

- **Public access and education:** Campground maintenance, wood permit sales and public education at local events including fire prevention outreach

- **Workforce development:** On-the-job training and pathways to seasonal and permanent federal employment for rural resident

This model does not merely address staffing gaps; it builds durable local capacity, strengthens interagency relationships and keeps forest management work in the hands of people who live and work in the landscape they are managing.

Counties as Intergovernmental Partners

Federal policy decisions have direct impacts on county governments and the residents we serve. The Modoc County experience demonstrates that when the federal government makes genuine coordination with county governments a real priority rather than a procedural checkbox, the results are transformative. Programs like SRS Title II provide the financial foundation that makes local partnerships like the RAC possible. The Shared Stewardship model shows that workforce solutions do not require new federal bureaucracy; they require flexibility and a willingness to work with county and community institutions that already exist.

The Modoc County/Modoc National Forest Coordination Committee exemplifies what the intergovernmental partnership this Subcommittee is examining can look like when it functions well. On a monthly basis, two members of the Modoc County Board of Supervisors, the county natural resources advisor and the UCCE Modoc natural resources advisor meet directly with Modoc National Forest leadership. This ongoing dialogue ensures local input meaningfully shapes federal resource management decisions across three core areas:

- Forest health and proactive wildfire risk reduction
- Rangeland management and sustainable grazing solutions
- Infrastructure maintenance, including roads and water development

This structure does not require new legislation to replicate. It requires federal agency leaders who are willing to show up, listen and act on what they hear. Congress can reinforce that expectation by directing the USFS to formalize coordination structures with county governments as a standard element of national forest management.

Therefore, NACo urges Congress to:

- Enact a long-term or permanent reauthorization of SRS with full funding for all three titles before the program lapses again at the end of FY 2026, providing the certainty that county governments need to plan, hire and sustain the local capacity that makes federal-county partnerships work;

- Support legislative and administrative frameworks that enable shared stewardship agreements and workforce partnerships between federal agencies, county governments and university extension programs, and direct the USFS to develop a framework for replicating the Modoc County model in other rural communities facing federal staffing gaps; and

- Direct the USFS to establish or formalize regular coordination structures with county governments as a standard component of national forest management planning, recognizing counties as essential intergovernmental partners in achieving forest health, wildfire resilience and rural economic stability.

The Modoc County experience proves that when a federal forest leadership team genuinely coordinates with a local county government, the results benefit both public lands and rural communities. Proactive wildfire management, restored rangeland health, expanded workforce capacity and youth development programs are concrete results that coordination produce when it is taken seriously by both partners.

A strong federal-state-local partnership is essential to the long-term health of our forests, our rangelands and the communities that depend on them. NACo appreciates the Subcommittee's attention to this important issue and stands ready to work with Congress to strengthen that partnership.

Respectfully submitted,

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