

**Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change**  
**Hearing on**  
**“Building a 100 Percent Clean Economy: The Challenges Facing Frontline Communities”**  
**November 20, 2019**

**Hon. Melissa Cribbins**  
**Commissioner**  
**Coos County Board of Commissioners**  
**On behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo)**

**The Honorable John Shimkus (R-IL)**

1. As chair of the National Association of Counties’ Environment, Energy, and Land Use Steering Committee, you have the opportunity to work with county officials from across the country to address issues facing county governments.

a. Obviously, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with environmental justice concerns given such rich diversity across the country. What can you tell us about the challenges and opportunities facing rural Americans, in particular?

**RESPONSE:** Counties are highly diverse across the nation, and vary immensely in natural resources, social and political systems, cultural, economic and structural circumstances, and public health and environmental responsibilities. Counties range in area from 26 square miles (Arlington County, Virginia) to 87,860 square miles (North Slope Borough, Alaska). The population of counties varies from Loving County, Texas, with just under 100 residents, to Los Angeles County, California, which is home to nearly ten million people. Of the nation’s 3,069 counties, approximately 70 percent are considered “rural,” with populations less than 50,000, and 50 percent of these have populations below 25,000. At the same time, there are more than 120 major urban counties, which collectively provide essential services to more than 130 million people each day. Despite our diversities, counties work to ensure that our constituent’s feedback is heard at the state and federal level.

County governments exist to deliver public services at the local level, and we are accountable to our constituents and communities as well as to state and federal authorities. At the leadership level, county elected officials are tasked with shaping county and community policies and investments that drive economic and community development, safeguard our citizens and community investments, and promote public health and wellbeing. In fulfilling this mission, counties are not only subject to state and federal regulations, but also help to implement these regulations at the local level.

Rural counties are particularly constrained due to limited resources to raise revenues to support essential county services. Rural economies are often limited to few industries, such as agriculture, manufacturing and natural resources. This has caused an imbalance at the local level, particularly in rural America, to make the substantial investments necessary to have a 100 percent clean economy.

2. Based on your experience as a county commissioner in Coos County, Oregon, what can you tell us about the issues that local governments deal with to balance environmental protection and economic growth?

**RESPONSE:** Many of counties' responsibilities are mandated by both the state and federal government. While county responsibilities differ widely, most counties have significant authority. These authorities include construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and critical infrastructure, assessment of property taxes, record keeping of property deeds, marriages and other critical public data, running elections, community corrections, and overseeing jails, court systems and public hospitals. Counties are also responsible for child welfare, consumer protection, economic development, employment and workforce training, emergency management, land use planning and zoning.

Among our numerous responsibilities, environmental stewardship is a primary function of county governments to create healthy, safe and vibrant communities for our residents. In fact, counties play a key role as both co-regulators and regulated entities in protecting the environment and providing public services for our residents and businesses.

For example, as regulators, counties are often responsible for controlling water pollution at the local level. We may enact floodplain and discharge rules, set building code requirements, adopt setbacks for land use plans, and may be responsible for environmental restoration, water recharge areas, green infrastructure, water conservation programs and other programs. Additionally, as owners of public safety infrastructure, we are often required to comply with federal and state requirements.

Concurrently, counties must balance other essential responsibilities, such as promoting community and economic development opportunities without causing adverse environmental impacts.

Counties are often met with regulatory hurdles in our attempts to encourage economic development. Development projects are often stalled in the bureaucratic, lengthy, complex and duplicative federal regulatory process. Counties support streamlining the regulatory process to have pragmatic regulations that can be easily administered at the local level.

Due to limited local resources and mounting federal and state mandates, often combined with fragile local economies, county governments are challenged to make both long-term strategic budget investments while working towards environmental sustainability.

3. Given the limited local resources and mounting federal and state mandates, how are county governments challenged to make long-term strategic budget investments and work toward environmental sustainability?

**RESPONSE:** With the rapid increase in state and federal unfunded mandates, it adds a layer of fiscal strain. In many instances, counties are mandated to provide a growing number of services while operating under more state and federal restrictions on how we generate revenue.

a. Can you provide specific examples of public health or safety trade-offs your community had to make to comply with federal or state mandates?

**RESPONSE:** In order to comply with unfunded state and federal mandates, counties often have to crowd out other areas in our budget to provide for environmental protection, energy sustainability, fire suppression and prevention, law enforcement, emergency response, education and infrastructure, or increase our local taxes and fees on constituents to make up the difference. Ultimately, our shared constituents suffer from reduced public services or increased taxes at the local level.

Local governments like mine are not able to fully tax the property values or products derived from federal lands, yet we are often responsible for supporting and providing essential government services (mandated by law), such as first responders and emergency services, transportation infrastructure, law enforcement, education and health care.

Specifically, in Coos County, the increase in state and federal unfunded mandates, along with decreasing federal timber revenues, has forced us to drastically reduce the number of Sheriff's patrols and jail beds. During the late hours of the night and early hours of the morning, only one Sheriff's deputy patrols our county, which is an area of 1,806 square miles.

4. How has the devastation of the timber industry affected the quality of educational resources or other social services that you can provide to your community?

**RESPONSE:** Coos County faces challenges in our ability to raise revenue from a large amount of federal public land in our jurisdiction. Coos County encompasses 1,806 square miles and nearly a quarter of our county is considered federal public lands. With many of these lands protected by the federal government, there is plenty of regulatory red tape that prevents counties from collecting revenues from these lands to provide essential services to our community.

Additionally, Coos County previously received nearly twelve million dollars per year in timber revenue from the O&C timberlands, not adjusted for inflation, before the closure of the federal forests from the listing of the spotted owl, which has decimated our timber industry. We now receive about \$1.5 million each year in Secure Rural Schools funding to make up for this loss, and that amount decreases every year. This is a ninety percent reduction in funding, but costs have continued to rise. We are expected to provide the same level of services on ten percent of the funding.

It used to be possible for one person to work in the timber or fishing industry and provide for a family. Now, we find that, even with both spouses working regular jobs, we frequently have families that continue to slip below the poverty line. As a result, the county must step in to provide additional services to those families under the poverty line.

5. Where can the Federal government improve, when it comes to engagement with local governments?

**RESPONSE:** Counties are an important part of the federal, state, and local partnership. As co-regulators, we often have to work together to advance the cause at hand. In order to have the Federal government improve its engagement with local governments, we want to be engaged early in the process so we can learn about what options we should be exploring. Additionally, for intergovernmental consultation to be a success, Congress and federal agencies should communicate with local governments early and often throughout the legislative and rulemaking process. Counties need a strong federal partner to ensure costs are shared equitably and services are delivered expeditiously.

Lastly, counties are responsible for providing critical services to renewable energy sites, including those on public lands. Many of my colleagues across the country are partnering with federal agencies to develop energy conservation plans to streamline the development of renewable energy and federal lands. We hope to see Congress pass renewable energy revenue-sharing legislation, known as the Public Land Renewable Energy Development Act, introduced by Representative Paul Gosar, to help ease the cost burdens that public lands counties face in providing necessary services.