

STATEMENT OF

THE HONORABLE SKIP BRANDT  
COMMISSIONER  
IDAHO COUNTY, IDAHO

BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS

HEARING ON H.R. 6435

FEBRUARY 3, 2022

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding today's hearing on H.R. 6435, "To provide for the application of certain provisions of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 (SRS) for fiscal year 2021 (H.R. 6435)." We appreciate Congresswoman McMorris Rodgers sponsoring the bill and thank both of you, Chairman Neguse and Ranking Member Fulcher, for cosponsoring this critical legislation, which makes important technical corrections to the recent SRS reauthorization.

My name is Skip Brandt. I am a county commissioner in Idaho County, Idaho. Today I am representing the National Association of Counties. I am a small business owner and before serving in county elected office, I spent six years in the Idaho State Senate alongside Congressman Fulcher. Our county seat is Grangeville, approximately 220 miles north of our state capital, Boise. Our county's population is small, around 17,000, but at 5.5 million acres we are the largest in Idaho. Federal agencies manage approximately 4.5 million acres within our county with 2.2 million acres locked up in wilderness. Since the advent of our federal lands system, counties with significant portions of untaxable public lands have struggled to make up revenue shortfalls, especially over the past 30 years as federal regulations drastically reduced timber harvests within the National Forest System (NFS).

### **Secure Rural Schools**

In the previous century, timber harvests on federal lands produced a dependable funding base for county governments through 25 percent revenue sharing for timber receipts under the 1908 Act. After federal timber production dropped drastically in the 1990s, communities like mine were forced to reduce public services due to a lack of reliable revenue.

In response, Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) and Community Self-Determination Act in 2000. SRS provides consistent payments to over 700 counties in 41 states and Puerto Rico negatively impacted by decreased federal timber production. SRS mandates that funds be spent in specific ways according to each title of the law: Title I is dedicated to road maintenance and education, while Title II funds go to resource management projects on federal lands. Counties can use Title III money for law enforcement patrols or emergency response on federal lands, wildfire prevention programs and expanding broadband access in schools.

Counties use these funds to maintain infrastructure on and off NFS lands, keep teachers in their classrooms, purchase advanced learning technologies, conduct law enforcement patrols and provide search and rescue services for stranded visitors on public lands. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, Idaho County received \$6.4 million from SRS. SRS was designed to be a temporary program to support counties until timber production increased, and federal timber harvest receipts could provide sustainable revenue. Instead of opening our federal forest lands to production, we have seen a consistent decline in timber harvests, with SRS being reauthorized every few years.

While counties would prefer to rely on more timber production and federal timber harvest receipts, we realize that SRS must be a part of the equation until industry returns to our areas.

We appreciate the efforts of this Committee, bipartisan leaders in both chambers and the administration to secure three additional years of SRS through FY 2023 in the Infrastructure, Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) with funding increased to FY 2017 levels. The IIJA also included a new national program to expedite appointments to Resource Advisory Committees (RAC), more flexible use of Title III funds including expansion of broadband in schools, a critical issue as schools continue to grapple with the pandemic, and the reopening of the county payment election process for the first time since 2013.

Unfortunately, the current SRS extension requires a technical fix to implement the original program's objectives and these intended reforms. According to the U.S. Forest Service, under the current SRS extension, all counties would receive SRS payments, meaning those counties that have previously elected to receive 25 percent federal timber harvest payments would be forced to take SRS payments.

Additionally, SRS has a default allocation between Titles I and II if elections are not made by September 30 of each year. The latest reauthorization does not allow counties to elect their allocations for FY 2021 payments, meaning all funding would be split under the default allocation with 80 percent to Title I and 20 percent to Title II. For one year, counties would not have access to Title III funds, the SRS funding stream with the greatest amount of flexibility for counties, to use for search and rescue missions on federal lands, law enforcement patrols, and to reduce the threat of wildfire to surrounding communities. These funds would then be shifted into federal control under Title II, where the money is dedicated to projects on federal lands and counties have far less authority to determine how it will be used.

For FY 2022 SRS payments, counties would be able to make their allocation elections for Titles I, II, and III, but all national forest counties would still have to take SRS, even when we can get more money through federal timber harvest receipts. Counties would finally be able to take full advantage of all SRS reforms in FY 2023, the final year of the current reauthorization.

H.R. 6435 solves this issue by locking in the 2013 county elections for timber harvest receipts or SRS payments and county allocation elections between Titles I-III. The bill would then open the elections process for counties beginning in FY 2022. Rural, national forest counties strongly urge Congress to pass H.R. 6435 immediately.

This legislative fix is of great importance to Idaho County and all national forest counties. Idaho County received \$6.4 million in SRS last year. We chose to set aside 7 percent, or about \$450,000 to Title III. The loss of Title III funds will force us to forgo our fire mitigation program and shift the cost to local taxpayers for law enforcement and search and rescue operations on federal lands.

## **Conclusion**

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to share a little bit about Idaho County with the Subcommittee. We are happy to partner with you on H.R. 6435 to ensure counties have the flexibility with SRS funds that

Congress intended under the IJA. We ask you to move this legislation as expeditiously as possible, as time is of the essence. Thank you for holding today's hearing on this critical issue and I look forward to your questions.