House passes resolution urging restoration of timber payments

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

SALEM â€“ The Oregon House of Representatives today passed a resolution urging Congress to fully restore timber payments to Oregon counties. HJM 100 passed the House 57-0.

State Rep. Jean Cowan (D-Newport) said the timber payments were part of an agreement reached to curtail logging in Oregon and other states, and the counties relying on those funds feel betrayed by the federal governmentâ€™s refusal to fund the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act.

â€œThe federal government struck a deal â€“ they told us we couldnâ€™t cut the timber, but that they would pay to make up the difference. They have broken that deal. Now Oregon counties are dramatically impacted by the loss of those federal funds,â€• said Rep. Cowan. â€œWithout reauthorization of the County Payments, critical public safety programs will be cut. Education and health care services will suffer. County roads and bridges will continue to deteriorate at an increased rate. Counties provide a critical backbone for the State of Oregon â€“ and they need our help now.â€•

In 2006, Oregon counties received more than $220 million through the program. Members of Oregonâ€™s congressional delegation have been working for the past year to get the payments restored. Now, in the latest version of the Presidentâ€™s budget for 2008-2009, the program has been scaled back to only $200 million nationwide, meaning Oregon counties continue to face the threat of severely reduced payments.

House Speaker Jeff Merkley testified in support of the bill in the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee last week, telling legislators that this is a personal issue to him, growing up in a family that worked in the timber industry as a young boy in Roseburg. Back then, he said, it was the timber industry that was unstable and unpredictable.

â€œNow, rural Oregon families are finding out that the federal government is equally unpredictable and unreliable,â€• said Speaker Merkley. â€œIn Josephine County, they told us that they were going to have to shut down the juvenile facility, the library, cut the Sherriffâ€™s department in half, cut the prosecutorâ€™s office down to two attorneys,â€• Merkley said. â€œWe need a united voice â€“ a strong voice â€“ to say, this is not acceptable.â€•

â€œThis is not a subsidy or a government give-away,â€• said State Rep. Arnie Roblan (D-Coos Bay), chair of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. â€œThis is a long-standing agreement between our state and the federal government that they are breaking. Oregon has lived up to its end of the agreement. Now it is time for the federal government to live up to their end.â€•

Oregon House Democrats voted unanimously to pass HJM 100.

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