

Struggle for county timber payments benefiting rural schools continues

by Bend Weekly News Sources

DeFazio, Walden's bipartisan effort introduced bill to reauthorize successful "county payments" program

U.S. Congressmen Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) and Greg Walden (R-Ore.) yesterday announced the introduction of H.R. 17, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Reauthorization Act of 2007, legislation that would reauthorize the successful "county payments" law for seven more years. Of Oregon's 36 counties, 32 received payments through the program totaling over \$273 million last year. Because of the large amount of timber historically harvested from federal lands in Oregon, Oregon counties have received significant payments from the funding formula, with the Fourth and Second Districts receiving the most federal investment respectively. "When we first introduced this idea several years ago, the biggest obstacle to the passage of county payments legislation was opposition from the timber industry and environmental groups," DeFazio said. "We sure have come a long way."

Organizations from the farthest ends of the spectrum have come together to support this program in a model partnership among local, state and federal interests. Today, the biggest obstacles we face are ever-tightening budgets and growing federal deficits. So we must now redouble our efforts in hand with this unique coalition to reauthorize this legislation. It is the lifeblood of rural counties across America, who serve everyday as stewards of our federal lands. "Over one hundred years ago, the federal government made a commitment to rural counties, and we intend to see that it maintains it," Walden said. "Together with county and association leaders from across the country and many of our colleagues, Congressman DeFazio and I have led a partnership of education about how vital the county payments program is. We were deeply disappointed that all our efforts last year failed to reauthorize and fully fund the program to replace the funds lost by the decline in federal timber harvest. Since first introducing this legislation together two years ago, we've successfully educated both sides of the aisle about the critical nature of this program to rural communities in Oregon and throughout the country. Awareness of this importance is now very high, and it's time for members of Congress to unite behind a revenue stream to fully fund the program. There is no more important issue to the health of rural counties. Before passage of the county payments law, Oregon counties were receiving payments as the result of 1908 and 1937 laws specifying that the government share 25 percent of U.S. Forest Service (USFS) receipts and 50 percent of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) receipts with counties in any state that hosts Federal land from which timber is cut. These payments had been used to help finance rural schools and roads. Toward the mid-to-late-nineties, however, the principal source of those revenues, federal timber sales, declined by over 70 percent nationwide. Consequently, the corresponding revenues shared with rural counties throughout the country declined precipitously, hurting school and transportation funding. In 2000, legislation to remedy this imbalance was enacted into law, establishing a six-year payment formula for counties that receive revenue-sharing payments for USFS and BLM lands. The formula established a stable source of revenue, to be used for education, roads and county services in rural areas. The safety net amount was based on historical timber receipts. If counties elect to use funding for projects on public lands, the projects must be developed by consensus and approved by a Resource Advisory Committee (RAC), a group designed to ensure expanded economic activity for the resource-based communities benefit from this legislation. RACs are made up of individuals from the local area dedicated to directing a portion of the funds for projects in their respective regions. A county may also choose to use funds for search and rescue, community service work camps, easement purchases, forest-related education opportunities, fire prevention, and community forestry."

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