



NEWS

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Herger Joins Effort on House Floor Imploring Funding of Secure Rural Schools Program

(WASHINGTON, DC) - Congressman Wally Herger last evening participated in a series of speeches on the House floor aimed at bringing attention to the urgent need to reauthorize and fund the Secure Rural Schools Program. These "Special Order" speeches allow representatives to promote important legislation that they believe deserve prompt consideration in the House. Herger joined representatives of both parties in the sixty minute-long discussion, and spoke of the program's profound importance to Northern California. Below is the text of Herger's speech, as delivered, as well as a link to video and audio.

I'd thank the gentleman, my good friend from Oregon, Mr. Walden, and I thank the work that Mr. Defazio is doing, and the others in this incredibly, crucially important issue that affects those of us in rural areas of the West, particularly, and in these forested areas. Like both of you, I have a heavily forested district, and I understand the challenges that our rural communities face because of the large federal presence in our area.

Many of our fellow citizens, and even some of the members of this body, do not realize that the presence of federal lands places a burden on nearby communities. I'm so pleased to join you tonight and shine the light on that fact, and remind our colleagues that the "Secure Rural Schools" program has expired and is in need of reauthorization.

In my district of Northern California, school boards, county officials, and sheriff's departments are currently in "crisis mode." For example, Siskiyou County is looking at a 91 percent loss in school funding. In Tehama County, library hours, music, art, and physical education classes would be dramatically cut.

And this crisis extends well beyond education. County road safety programs will be decimated as well. Sheriff departments will also bear the brunt of these cuts. In total, eight of my ten counties are experiencing drastic budget declines because Congress has not extended the "Secure Rural Schools" program.

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It is important to point out to our friends who represent urban areas is that this crisis is not the fault of rural counties. It is the fault of federal policies that are out of their control, specifically the failure of Congress to address that burden by extending the Secure and Rural Schools program.

In my home state of California, close to half of the land area is owned by the federal government. And in my district that number is considerably larger. In one of my counties nearly ninety percent of the land is under federal ownership.

This large federal presence has placed the counties I represent at a severe economic disadvantage. Acreage that would normally be privately owned, and therefore generating tax revenue to help fund essential local services, is instead locked away by the federal government.

President Teddy Roosevelt and our predecessors who served in the 60th Congress recognized this problem and addressed it with a "promise" - which was enshrined into law in 1908 - that the federal government would pay its fair share of local costs by sending a percentage of national forest revenues to the counties that are home to federal lands. This "promise" acknowledged that the rural counties we represent would not be able to fund vital services like rural education, road maintenance, and emergency care as long as enormous tracts of land within their boundaries were locked away under federal control.

We need to be very clear about the nature of the "promise" that was struck between Congress and rural forested counties. These funds were not designed to be a handout; and they are not part of any federally sponsored "rural development" program. They are an obligation. They are part of a compact between the federal government and the people of rural America in recognition of the difficulties created by large federal ownership. This compact must be honored by the 110th Congress that we're currently in.

The rural counties I represent - and I know this is true in other areas throughout the West - have sacrificed a great deal playing host to America's National Forests. I don't think it's too much to ask for this Congress to set aside a fraction of our \$2.9 trillion budget in order to keep our word to rural America. We need to act immediately to extend the 'Secure Rural Schools' safety net so our rural counties can get out of "crisis mode" and then we can all get back to working on a long term solution to our forest health problems.

Again, I'd like to thank my colleagues here tonight for your efforts to extend the Secure Rural Schools program. I am committed to working with each of you until we are successful; and I ask other Members of the House to recognize the incredible hardships that will result if this legislation is not renewed. And I yield back to the gentleman of Oregon.

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Video and audio of this speech can be accessed at:

<http://www.house.gov/herger/images/CWHSecureRuralSchools2-12-7.rm>

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