

Testimony of the Honorable Paul Pearce, Commissioner, Skamania County, WA
on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo)

Before the Subcommittee on Parks, Forests, House Natural Resources Committee

Oversight hearing on *"Building Success: Implementation of the
Secure Rural Schools Program"*

July 29, 2010

On behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo) I wish to thank Chairman Rahall, Ranking Member Hastings, Subcommittee Chair Grijalva, Subcommittee Ranking Member Bishop, and members of the House Natural Resources Committee for this opportunity to discuss the benefits and successes of the Secure Rural School and Communities Self Determination Act.

Seven hundred twenty nine (729) or 24%, of the nation's three thousand sixty eight (3068) counties contain national forests, some equaling up to 90% of their land mass. The 154 National Forests cover an area of 193 million acres across this country. These counties are responsible for the infrastructure Roads, Schools, and Emergency services... that allow those forests to exist for as Gifford Pinchot , the first Forest Service Chief, said "The greatest good, of the greatest number, for the long run."

In 1891 the Congress created Forest Reserve authority through the General Revision Act. By 1905 those reserves had grown to more than 80 million acres. President Roosevelt remade the U.S. Bureau of Forestry into the USDA Forest Service with Gifford Pinchot as the first chief forester. That began a three year process which resulted in Congress transferring all forest reserves to the new Forest Service.

The 1908 Act also concluded the conversation between the Counties containing these forests, Congress and the Administration. The contract fulfilled the promise of Gifford Pinchot who said that no community would suffer for hosting these lands. The contract was for revenue sharing the first in the nation .. of 25% of all revenues generated on these lands. This clearly made sense at the time as the growing nation extracted renewable resources for the good of all.

The contract worked well for nearly a century ... into the late 1980's when court decisions, Endangered Species Listings, such as the spotted owl, and a general change in the priorities of the nation dramatically reduced timber and other extraction. In 1992 congress created Owl Guarantee monies for those counties hardest hit by the spotted owl.

In 2000 Congress passed the Secure Rural School and Communities Self Determination Act which authorized payments through 2006. These payments were a life saver for our forest counties. In 2007 Congress reauthorized for one year and then in 2008 reauthorized for an additional four years through 2011. This reauthorization could not have come at a more appropriate time and clearly recognized the ongoing contract between these forest counties and the Federal government – and what a tremendous success it has been.

The Act has three Titles, each of which has clearly defined responsibilities.

Title I is payments for county roads and schools. Each state determines the division of these funds based on the original 1908 revenue sharing law. This money equates almost exclusively in these communities to jobs -- county road and school employees. Without this symbiotic relationship our children would not be able to get to school, often over large distances, nor would they necessarily have schools to attend or teachers to instruct them.

The gateway communities to our national forests would simply not exist without this infrastructure. These County roads are how the vast population that recreates on these millions of acres travel to and from them.

I mentioned how this reauthorization could not have come at a better time. Reauthorization in the fall of 2008 came at the same time as the economy was beginning to fall apart. According to Dr Eylers economic analysis (report attached) these payments have an impact to the tune of 1.3 billion in sales, 188 million in realized tax revenue and most importantly represent 11,000 jobs.

Consider for a moment that this loss had occurred at the same time as the full force of the recession hit. This is especially true, in these mostly rural communities where the loss of one family wage job often results in the entire family having to leave the community to find work, -- the spouse quits their job and their children are withdrawn from school, lowering enrollment, causing even greater job loss.

We wish to thank Congress for the reauthorization which has resulted in so much positive economic benefit to our communities and schools. This century long contract has served its purpose well keeping these forest counties and schools vibrant and successful.

Title II of the Act is money specifically to be used for projects on and for the forest itself utilizing one of the greatest successes of this entire act -- the resource advisory committees or as they are known RAC's. Others will speak at length to the RAC's. Suffice it to say that the RAC's are the most successful collaborative nationwide effort ever seen within the forest system.

Finally there is Title III which is money to be used by the county for specific purposes other than roads.

In the original act these purposes included emergency services on the forest, fire planning, community service work camps, easement purchases, forest related after school programs and planning efforts to reduce or mitigate the impact of development on adjacent Federal lands.

The 2008 reauthorization removed all categories except emergency services, as well as community wildfire planning and implementation.

In terms of search and rescue I will speak to some actual cases in my county to demonstrate how these incidents can become very expensive. Covering 88% of Skamania County is the Gifford Pinchot National Forest including the Mt St Helens National Monument. Added to that is the 80,000 acres of the Columbia Gorge Scenic Area. Search and rescue events are frequent. Our volunteer searchers are not reimbursed except for their mileage. Yet our average search costs are in the several thousand dollar range for those searches lasting just a few days and not requiring any aircraft. That being said, this year alone we have had two searches in the hundreds of thousands.

The first was a hiker who fell into the Mount St Helens crater. The total local, state and federal cost reached over \$150,000 dollars. The other involved a two week search for a young woman which cost local, state and federal taxpayers \$550,000. Sadly; both cases ended up being recovery's rather than rescues. Without Title III and assistance from both state and federal resources our counties could not afford these costs.

Finally, I want to tell you about a program in my county called Forest Youth Success which we funded from Title III under the 2000 Act and now fund through Title II. This program puts 40 high school age kids to work on crews in the forest on restoration projects during the summer. Recently WSU did a survey and study of the past participants of the program and found some very interesting initial data. Some of the reported outcomes:

- 100% said FYS increased their life skills such as team work and leadership.
- 97% said they learned important workplace skills such as punctuality and responsibility.
- 92% said they increased their use of financial resources.
- 69% said FYS influenced the shaping of their career choices.
- 47% said FYS shaped their college degree goals.

We believe this proves the value of connecting our kids to the forest that plays such a major role in their lives.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to speak about the success of the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self Determination Act.