

**Testimony of David Crews,
Superintendent, Norwood School District
Norwood, Colorado**

concerning

***“Secure Rural Schools Reauthorization and
Forest Management Options for a Viable
County Payment Program”***

before

**The Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forests, and Public Lands
of
The Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives**

July 14th, 2011

To: Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Grijalva,

My name is David Crews; I live and work in the town of Norwood on the Western Slope of Colorado. Today, I am here representing superintendents and school districts from Colorado who want to share the very grave concern we have about the potential loss of the Secure Rural School and Community Self-Determination Act. We are grateful for the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act which was originally established in 2000. The Act preserves the commitment made by President Roosevelt in 1910 when these forests were set aside for the benefit of the entire nation. As you are aware, SRSCA Funds are used to support educational and county services within forested communities.

The concerns I express are very real as nearly 68 percent of Colorado's forests are in federal ownership. As a resident of Colorado, I appreciate the year-round outdoor activities this provides; but as a member of a rural community, an educator and a parent, I must live with the consequences of that federal ownership as well. I am a resident of San Miguel County. This County, like others across the State is limited in the amount of taxes collected based upon the amount of national and state owned lands. And, unlike the urban and suburban areas along the Front Range it is almost impossible for us to tap into additional resources for our students. The reality for my home county, as well as other rural counties in the State, is that revenues from our forested land are not available to support our educational programs in either the form of bond elections or mill levy overrides. It is untaxable land!

To offset those tax losses, the rural school districts in the State of Colorado use SRSCA dollars to maintain and support educational opportunities for students. This year, my school district used the funding to implement a new K-12 writing program in order to improve our children's writing skills. Over the years the dollars have been used to develop and implement instructional strategies, improve our children's writing and math scores, and to prepare every student for post-secondary endeavors.

For other school districts in my regional area the funding is used to pay for additional teachers to keep the class sizes small to deliver a higher quality of instruction and to devote more time to each student to improve their

learning. Studies indicate that students achieve more with well-trained teachers, employing effective instructional techniques in small class size settings. This results in higher test scores, better preparedness for life after high school and increased post-secondary success.

School districts across the State of Colorado are also using the additional money from the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act to fund technology programs. One of the challenges faced by many rural school districts is limited internet access. Most rely on broadband delivered through phone or cable services. The speed and ease for delivery of information places these children at a distinct advantage. Many schools are using these funds to establish WIFI networks allowing students to access the internet not only at school but in the community and in their homes. For some school districts this money doesn't just go for additional instructional programs but augments the operating revenue resources to keep a school district running and capable of providing services and education in a regional setting.

Statewide there are nearly 480,000 school-age children living in Colorado counties that receive SRSCA funding. With the potential loss of these funds, a critical link between rural families and access to education could be permanently severed, forcing the affected families to drive dozens of miles, often over hazardous snowbound roads, in order for their child to attend school. This challenges the fundamental premise of fairness and equal access to education between rural and urban school children, placing some of our poorest and most at risk students at a distinct disadvantage.

K-12 public schools in Colorado are primarily funded through a combination local property taxes and state revenues. Historically, property taxes have made up the majority of funding. However, property taxes have declined precipitously, and because of the Gallagher Amendment to the State Constitution, which limits the valuation of residential property, the State is required to fill in for losses that residential property once covered. School districts can raise additional revenues through local bond and mill levy elections up to a specified level, but the economic vitality of many rural communities cannot support money raised through local bonds and mills. Another challenge we face: the State funds local school districts at a lower levels than the majority of the other States resulting in an increased reliance

by rural school districts in Colorado on SRSCA. We appreciate that Congress has supported the century long commitment to schools and counties.

Schools are not the only beneficiaries of SRSCA funding: counties and county services benefit as well. School Districts Representatives meet annually with their County Commissioners to determine how to allocate the secure rural schools funds for that year. School administrators have built relationships with county commissioners and have developed increased communication and understanding about the needs of the county and our students.

In closing, I would like to emphasize the need to reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. With the elimination of this resource rural districts will suffer additional hardships - and the education of our children will suffer. I appreciate the time you have given to hear my concerns and hope you have a better understanding of the importance of SRSCA to the rural school children of Colorado.