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Opening Statement by
The Honorable Doc Hastings
Chairman, House Committee on Natural Resources
At the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Oversight Hearing on
"Reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act and
Forest Management Options for a Viable County Payment Program"
July 14, 2011

Thank you, Chairman Bishop, for holding this important hearing on the Secure Rural Schools program and the federal forest management generally.

For over a century, the U.S. Forest Service has paid one-quarter of its gross receipts from timber sales, mineral extraction, leases, grazing and other fees for using national forest lands for use on schools and roads in over 700 rural counties where 193 million acres of national forests are located across the country—mostly in western states.

Additionally, the Bureau of Land Management has historically paid about half of the revenue receipts on 2.5 million acres of BLM-owned forest land in western Oregon known as the "O & C Trust" lands.

As we discuss the importance of revenue to these counties, timber sales--what should be the primary source of those revenues—have steeply declined from a high in the late 1980's of over \$1.5 billion to just \$186 million last year—an 88% drop. The result has been a staggering loss of jobs and economic productivity in rural forest communities.

This serious decline in revenues is due, in large part, to federal environmental and regulatory policies and environmental lawsuits over the past 20 years—exacerbated by this Administration - that have blocked or shut down timber sales and active forest management.

More federal land acquisition, wilderness designations and other restrictive management of existing lands have resulted in billions of dollars in federal maintenance backlogs, an increasing risk of catastrophic wildfires that emit tons of carbon into the atmosphere and sediment into streams and rivers, and more diseased and dying trees.

Rather than maintain a status quo program that yields less revenue for counties, current statutory authorities should be reviewed to allow harvesting of more timber to make forests healthier and more economically viable for state and local governments to use for schools and other local needs.

I look forward to hearing the testimony of the witnesses here today, including our colleague, Congressman Walden, a former member of this Committee, who has worked for years on this important issue. I also recognize two witnesses are here from eastern Washington, including Paul Pearce, from Skamania County, where 90 percent of the land is federally owned.

I am particularly interested in hearing from the Forest Service witness about how the Administration can reconcile the finalization of a revised Forest Planning Rule, the Northern Spotted Owl recovery plan, and recommendations for more wilderness designations at the same time it proposes to make virtually no changes to the Secure Rural Schools program to allow for reasonable timber harvests and more active forest management.

The Forest Planning Rule should be re-written to encourage flexibility for states and local governments to get into the forests, remove dead and diseased trees and provide a more certain, long-term economic tax base for schools and their communities—something that was intended by the original Secure Rural Schools Act.

I am hopeful that this hearing will begin a constructive legislative effort to improve upon the federal commitment to counties that rely on the Secure Rural Schools program as its authorization is close to expiring, and I look forward to working with my colleagues on realistic options to achieve a more secure and dependable source of revenue.

Thank-you, Mr. Chairman.