

Mike Jacobs
Johnson County, Arkansas
County Judge

Testimony to Subcommittee on National Parks, Forest and Public Lands
Re: Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act
July 27, 2010

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking member Hastings and Committee members good morning I am Mike Jacobs, County Judge, Johnson County, Arkansas. I appreciate the honor and the privilege of testifying here today regarding the Secure Rural Schools & Community Self-Determination Act; a partnership between federal and local government that, in my opinion, is vital to the betterment of rural schools and roads in and about our National Forests. Specifically, allow me to address my experience with the U.S. Forest Service in Johnson County, Arkansas.

I was elected County Judge in 1991. At that time Johnson County contained some 1,030 miles of road 250 of which was located in the National Forests in our county. Our county road & bridge budget at that time was about \$760,000 for the entire county. Today our budget is \$2.9 million dollars. The U.S. Forest Service, in 1991, had a decent budget for the maintenance and operation of roads through the national forests. The budget provided the routine maintenance necessary to keep gravel roads in decent shape. Johnson County, of course, assisted the Forest Service in the maintenance of these roads on an “as needed” basis. This partnership between the county and the Service worked well for as long as our local Forest Service office was provided with the funding to take care of the roads in the National Forests. It was not long after I became county judge, however, that funding to our local office began to decrease.

Fast-forward to 2010 and our local office of the Forest Service budgets some \$30,000 for the maintenance of the 250 odd miles of County roads running through the Ozark National Forest in Johnson County. In addition, the Forest Service no longer has a single road-grader, backhoe or dump truck. The Forest Service attempts to provide some service on the roads in the National Forest, however, with only \$30,000 available and no equipment with which to perform routine maintenance they simply cannot perform much more than cosmetic maintenance—and I think you would agree that \$30,000 will not buy much in the way of maintenance. The contract cost of one grading of the 250 miles of road in the Ozark National Forest is in excess of \$24,000. Practically speaking, the Forest Service, in Johnson County, Arkansas, has had their ability to maintain their roads cut so severely that, for all intents and purposes, they no longer maintain those roads. Their default position is “if a 4-wheel drive can get up and down their roads then that will have to do.”

I’m sure the members are aware that, although we are talking about roads in the National Forest, there are families living in these areas and using these roads on a daily basis. There are dozens of families that live in along roads running through the Ozark National Forest. Our citizens have

to have decent roads on which they can drive to work and upon which they can receive those services, we so often take for granted, such as mail delivery and school bus services for the children living in these areas. Although the funds to perform maintenance of their roads have been cut from the Forest Service's budget these roads must still be maintained. That is where Johnson County comes into the picture.

In the last several years Johnson County has had no choice but to assume near total responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of roads in our National Forest. We are constantly buying and hauling gravel to place on these roads as well as using our road graders to provide the routine maintenance necessary to keep these roads passable. For Johnson County this is where the Secure Rural Schools funding is vital. In 2008 Johnson County received some \$690,000. Although the lion's share of this revenue goes to our rural schools a reasonable amount comes to the county through Title I that helps to offset the expenses of buying gravel, the provision of heavy equipment for maintaining the roads and the human capital necessary for operating that equipment. If the proposed cuts go forward we will see Johnson County's share decrease from \$690,000 to \$245,000. Johnson County will experience a loss of over \$60,000 that currently goes to buy gravel for the maintenance of these roads. At that level of funding the county will be maintaining the roads in our National Forest, essentially, at very little cost to the federal government. Road maintenance is required by State law so our financial relationship with the Forest Service is vital. Otherwise we will cut other social services to maintain roads inside the Ozark National Forest

I would respectfully suggest to the members that the partnership between federal and local government that was forged during the Teddy Roosevelt administration is in danger of falling apart. It is not a partnership when one side provides all of the revenue needed by the partnership. Johnson County cannot tax National Forests consequently we have no way of making up for the loss of those lands to our tax base without a program like Secure Rural Schools through which the federal government maintains its end of the bargain struck by President Roosevelt.

I would like to end by making it clear that I'm not chastising the Forest Service for their lack of maintenance of the roads in our National Forests because I'm not. I have great respect for the Service and, in fact, my father retired from the Forest Service so I've been around foresters for about as long as I can remember. Occasionally the Service is able to obtain additional revenues when there is a major crisis on one of their roads. Not too long ago one of our roads sloughed off the side of a hill stranding several households. Working with the Service in D.C. our local Ranger's office was able to get one-time funds sufficient to make the needed repairs with little expense to the county. This is not the rule; however, unfortunately it is the exception. I have a great relationship with our local forester and I know she would love to have the revenues available to better take care of the roads in the National Forests, however, those revenues simply aren't available.

I urge all of you to support a long term reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act so that we can provide on a dependable basis those services that are fundamental to the economic welfare of citizens in Forested communities all across the United States. Thank You.