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CONTACT:
[Jill Strait](#), [Mallory Micetich](#)
202-226-9019

Chairman Hastings Unveils Draft Proposal to Restore Active Forest Management and Help Rural Schools & Counties

Legislative hearing scheduled for April 11th

WASHINGTON, D.C. – House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings (WA-04) today unveiled a draft proposal to address the expiration of the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program. The draft proposal, [Restoring Healthy Forests for Healthy Communities Act](#), renews the federal government’s commitment to manage forest resources for the benefit of rural schools and counties by allowing active forest management projects to take place in areas specifically identified by the U.S. Forest Service as capable of timber production.

The Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation will hold a legislative hearing on the draft bill, and others, on Thursday, April 11th 2013 at 10:00 A.M.

“The federal government made a promise over 100 years ago to actively manage our forests and provide a stable revenue stream for counties containing National Forest land. The federal government’s inability to uphold this promise and tie our forest lands up in bureaucratic red tape has left counties without sufficient funds to pay for teachers, police officers and emergency services; devastated local economies and cost thousands of jobs throughout rural America; and left our forests susceptible to deadly wildfires. Due to the lack of healthy forest management, last year 44 times as many acres of U.S. Forest land burned in wildfires than were responsibly harvested. This is unacceptable and exposes the fundamental failure of the federal government to keep our forests healthy,” said Chairman Hastings.

“There are timber lands that have already been specifically identified by the Forest Service as areas capable of timber production. This draft proposal would simply cut through red tape to allow responsible timber production to occur in those areas and make the federal government uphold its commitment to rural schools and counties.”

- Specifically, the *Restoring Healthy Forests for Healthy Communities Act*:
 - Requires that the Forest Service actively manage its commercial timber lands to produce revenues.
 - Requires the Forest Service to produce at least half of the sustainable yield of timber each year and, as required by law since 1908, share 25 percent of receipts with the counties.
 - Protects the environment by requiring projects to complete National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA)

consultations, but streamlines the process to avoid frivolous and lengthy delays, lawsuits, and bureaucratic red tape.

- Will provide an extension of SRS payments to allow counties to transition back to payments from active forest management.

Background:

Under federal law passed in 1908, the U.S. Forest Service has historically shared 25 percent of all timber revenues with rural counties containing National Forest land to compensate them for large amounts of federal land that cannot be taxed. Since that time, these “25 percent payments” have provided counties with much-needed funding for essential services such as education and infrastructure. Yet by the late 1990s timber harvests dramatically declined due to federal overregulation and harmful lawsuits, prompting Congress in 2000 to pass the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS). SRS was created to provide “transition payments” over a six year period while Congress worked to increase timber production, or rural counties found an alternative source of revenue.

However, since the passage of SRS the federal government has failed to oversee a transition into increased timber production yet continued to provide money to these counties without ensuring the public land is properly managed. Lack of active forest management inhibits job creation, deprives counties of revenue to fund schools and roads, and makes our National Forests increasingly susceptible to wildfires and invasive species. As a result, many rural counties are suffering double-digit unemployment with little hope of creating meaningful jobs without access to common sense management of the public lands.

SRS payments were extended through fiscal year 2012. Payments to counties will [decline](#) by 80% next year unless Congress takes action. The Obama Administration has also [notified](#) States that it intends to retroactively subject SRS payments, which were made to counties in January based on fiscal year 2012 revenues, to the fiscal year 2013 sequester. It is requesting repayment of \$17.9 million in SRS and 25 percent fund payments that have already been disbursed to States.

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