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## Statement of Scott Stouder, Trout Unlimited's Idaho Public Lands Director

### U. S. House of Representatives, Natural Resources Committee

#### Hearing on Renewal of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination

Act: *Building Success: Implementation of the Secure Rural Schools Program.*

July 29, 2010

Dear Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Scott Stouder. I live in Pollock, Idaho. I'm Trout Unlimited's (TU's) public lands director in that state. I appreciate the chance to talk with you today about serving on one of Idaho's Resource Advisory Committees, or RACs. I've served on the Southwest Idaho RAC for the past six years, and in that time I've discussed and considered hundreds of project proposals.

My brief testimony today will demonstrate why TU affirms that Title II of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act ("SRSCA") is an effective program for conducting substantial resource conservation projects in a cooperative manner with excellent stakeholder and community buy-in. Because of its great record of success, we strongly support reauthorization of the program and urge Congress and the Administration to work together to ensure a smooth and seamless future for it. To increase the Act's public benefits, we offer two recommendations for a reauthorized program:

- Allocate at least 15% of SRSCA funds to Title II projects. Though it would not apply to Counties that receive less than \$100,000 per year, this allocation would roughly double the current level of Title II funding.
- Dedicate at least half of the Title II funding allocation (7.5% of the SRSCA total) to watershed protection and restoration projects that will improve watershed health and fish and wildlife habitat.

#### I. Trout Unlimited and RAC's

Under Title II of the SRSCA, the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior – who are responsible for National Forest and BLM lands, respectively – are authorized to establish Resource Advisory Committees (RACs). The RACs are charged with proposing Title II projects. Each RAC must consist of fifteen stakeholders, broadly representing conservation, community and commodity interests. The applicable Secretary has the discretion to approve of RAC projects. Such projects must further the purposes of the SRSCA, including fostering investment in roads and other infrastructure, soil productivity, ecosystem health, watershed restoration and maintenance, control of noxious weeds, and reestablishment of native species. RACs typically have authority over some subset of a state's territory. For instance, there are six RACs for the State of Idaho:

Central Idaho, Eastern Idaho, the Idaho Panhandle, North Central Idaho, South Central Idaho, and Southwest Idaho.

TU works to restore streams and rivers, because anglers and sportsmen care about healthy rivers and great places to take their kids fishing. This means that TU works in rural communities across the country: with ranchers in the West, farmers in the Midwest, and in rural mining communities in the East. TU cleans up mining pollution, works with farmers and ranchers to improve riparian habitat and restore stream channels, and works with western irrigators to improve water management and restore streamflows. TU also works with sportsmen who care about protecting great hunting and fishing places on public lands. That's mostly what I do.

The RACs that the SRSCA started back in 2000 are a natural fit with TU's work because of our partnership approach, and our focus on restoring watersheds. The funding that comes through the RACs has contributed to these watershed efforts.

From FY 2001 to FY 2009, Title II of the SRSCA has directed \$308 million to the RACs. That's only 8.3 % of the total SRSCA funding, but it has made a difference. One hundred and eight (108) RACs have been authorized through the SRSCA; 55 were initially organized, and 53 more have been added since.

I'm going to tell you about what my RAC has done, and also mention how the South East Idaho RAC helped restore the South Fork of the Snake River - the great work that my Idaho co-worker Matt Woodard has done in partnership with his local RAC.

## **II. My Story**

My SW Idaho RAC encompasses seven counties: Adams, Boise, Elmore, Gem, Idaho, Valley and Washington. Our Title II funding has averaged approximately one million dollars per year, investing in collaborative projects that contribute to maintaining public lands and restoring watershed health. That money has been instrumental in helping these local governments meet such basic needs on public lands within their borders such as access infrastructure maintenance, educational and outreach needs and other services provided by county government on our public lands. In these large, rural counties, where land ownership is predominately Forest Service, that's a critical source of funding. From TU's perspective, the Secure Rural Schools program provides important funding for watershed restoration projects stretching the spectrum from culvert replacements to road improvement and decommissioning.

One of the project criteria that our RAC places high emphasis on is matching funds. This effort not only multiplies the fiscal power of the federal funding in each project, but invests other groups, agencies and landowners into the projects and the entire program. This "community and collaborative building" part of the program is an important factor. Indeed, it could be the most important factor. Not only is this "collaborative" effort spelled out in the Act itself, but, in my opinion, it's the glue that brings everything together and enables the program to be more than just another source of federal funding.

A great example of the RACs' emphasis on collaboration, in my mind, is a project that our RAC participated in with the Council, ID (Adams County) school district a few years ago. Murray Dalglish, the Council school principal and school district superintendent came to us with a proposal to help expand the bio-fuels heating and cooling of his school, which he had developed, constructed and funded through various sources, including passing a local bond.

Council, ID, like many small, rural communities, has high unemployment, low per-capita income and is surrounded by National Forests. Like many other communities its history is timber, but its lumber mills have come and gone and its basic economy now is small farms and ranches, some special-niche logging, and what jobs the Forest Service and local government offers. So money is tight and passing a local bond to fund a new – and basically untested - heating and cooling system for the school, as you could imagine, was not an easy task. The bio-fuels plant is basically a wood-chip burning facility in a small concrete building located on the school property that directly heats and cools the Council school buildings. The system has been up and running for five years now. It is saving the district about \$40,000 a year in energy costs, and the district is paying off their bond with those savings.

The Council school district's bio-fuels plant is a wonderful success story in itself, but I want to tell you the story of how the Secure Rural Schools program helped expand that effort to help bring their national forests and the community closer together, while doing much more than just saving on electric bills.

The Council high school had been involved with the Council Ranger District on the Payette National Forest for some years, raising native plants in a small greenhouse on the school property. Those native plants were then used in restoration projects on national forests in the District. The school had built up a robust curriculum around this effort with many students involved in raising the plants and going out on the National Forest and helping plant and work on local restoration projects. However, the program was constricted by budget and space for raising plants. The greenhouse was small, inefficient, and very expensive to operate. Murray, his students and staff, and District Forest Service personnel put their heads together and said: "Why don't we build a new, bigger and more efficient greenhouse, and use the new bio-fuels plant to heat and cool it?"

So, about three years ago they came to us – the SW RAC - with a \$94,000 proposal to help construct a new greenhouse. We listened to the enthusiasm of parents, teaching staff and students, as well as local Forest Service folks, who explained how this effort not only would give the District a valuable source of native plants for restoration work, but it was instilling an enthusiasm in students for furthering their education in forestry and natural resources – even to the extent of gaining college credits in natural resource programs at two of Idaho's state colleges. Our RAC decided to fund the proposal and the greenhouse was built. Last year, as the greenhouse was being completed, Murray came back to us, with a \$55,000 funding request to vastly improve the circulatory and computerized environmental control characteristics within the greenhouse. We funded that project as well. This year, the Council school district, working with local Forest Service personnel, have had their first successful planting of over 2000 plants from the greenhouse. We're looking toward watching this project bear fruit to both the National Forest and the local community for years to come.

Although our committee has funded hundreds of beneficial projects in the SW Idaho RAC's region over the years that I've served, this project stands out to me as an example of how well the Secure Rural Schools program and local RACs can work to bring local communities together with their federal land agencies to help the public lands that we all enjoy and cherish.

### **III. RAC's and Investment in Healthy Landscapes**

This is the same kind of collaboration that my friend and co-worker, Matt Woodard, has fostered in his almost ten years of work to restore the South Fork of the Snake River. The South Fork is an iconic western river that is one of the jewels of the entire Greater Yellowstone area. In this intensive restoration project, he has partnered with the South East Idaho RAC to produce significant conservation benefits.

The South Fork of the Snake River Restoration Project began in 2001 with the goal of reversing the decline of the native Yellowstone cutthroat trout fishery. The project has three basic components: habitat restoration; dam operation improvements; and angler engagement, with the goal of encouraging anglers to "catch and keep" non-native rainbow trout. TU has successfully reconnected four major Yellowstone cutthroat spawning tributaries to the mainstem, and works with private landowners in the area to improve fish passage and habitat around irrigation diversions. TU also works with the Bureau of Reclamation to regulate flows from Palisades Dam so they support the imperiled native fish.

The South East Idaho RAC helped fund the four major stream restoration projects, over the years contributing \$62,000. These projects all matched the RAC funding several times over. For example, the restoration and reconnection of Garden Creek to the South Fork of the Snake River was an over \$300,000-dollar project that matched the RAC's \$17,000 contribution with private donations, landowner contributions, state restoration dollars, and other federal sources.

This collaborative work has helped to keep Yellowstone cutthroat trout off the endangered species list, and has restored fish populations throughout the South Fork, creating a healthier, more robust river. It's an example of the RAC's investing in watershed health in their community, with the support of local landowners and sportsmen. It's keeping dollars in the rural areas while producing wide-spread public benefit.

### **IV. Public Benefit of Title II Funding Carried out Through RACs**

The Secure Rural Schools Act insulates county budgets from the boom-and-bust cycle of timber harvest and mining operations on federal lands. Not only is this good for rural school systems and county road budgets, the 8% of the Act's funding that goes through the RACs helps protect the values on federal lands in a way that benefits local communities.

#### **A. The Values of Public Land Contributes to Sustainable Economies**

It's a given that the values of public lands—for recreation, wildlife habitat, and clean water—are associated with economic growth and well-being. Quality local government services help public-land counties attract and retain businesses and families who choose to live near public lands. SRSCA reauthorization with the recommendations I've outlined has the opportunity to build support for conservation and restoration activities on public lands, and contribute to local government's ability to leverage these values into community sustainability.

This is because in today's economy, the bulk of the economic value of public lands lies in its ability to attract people – and their businesses – who want to live near protected lands for quality of life reasons. For example, research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Headwaters Economics, and others, has shown that 93% of employment in the 11 western states, comes from sources *other than* public lands' timber harvesting, mining or energy development. Similarly, a detailed economic analysis of the Clearwater Stewardship Project on the Seeley Lake District of Lolo National Forest in Montana (2003-2004, over a project area of 6800 acres) showed that the portion of the contract invested in restoration and monitoring accounted for 10% of the economic activity generated from the contract, and diversified the economic sectors that benefited from the contract. Surveys of business owners have consistently identified quality of life, including environmental amenities provided by public lands, as a key factor determining where entrepreneurs choose to locate. Amenities are also well-known to be a key factor in the attraction of retirement wealth.

A good example is the mostly rural Greater Yellowstone Area, with 18 million acres of public lands in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. When compared to fast-growing areas of the West, such as the Silicon Valley, the Puget Sound area, and the Front Range of Colorado, the Greater Yellowstone has outperformed them in the last three decades in terms of growth of jobs, and real personal income, wages, and per capita income. Why has this area done so well despite being rural and isolated? Because the wildland amenities of Greater Yellowstone are an asset that attracts talented people. Stories such as these are repeating themselves as the West transitions into a much more diverse, and resilient economy. Healthy, naturally functioning public lands with abundant fishing, hunting and outdoor recreation play a key role in that transition.

## **B. Recommendations for the Future**

To summarize, TU strongly supports the SRSCA and urges Congress to reauthorize its programs. Title II funding, and the RACs which develop the Title II projects, have been extremely valuable for improving watershed health in communities around the Nation. Recognizing this link between creating resilient, sustainable rural economies and investing in healthy federal lands, TU respectfully recommends that the Committee consider the following:

- Allocate at least 15% of SRSCA funds to Title II projects. Though it would not apply to Counties that receive less than \$100,000 per year, this allocation would roughly double the current level of Title II funding.
- Dedicate at least half of Title II funding (7.5% of the SRSCA total) to watershed protection and restoration projects that will improve watershed health and fish and wildlife habitat.

Healthy watersheds on federal lands provide not only high quality habitat for fish and wildlife, but also a suite of ecosystem services, such as clean drinking water and delivery of water for downstream users, that benefit nearby communities. TU sees the provision of ecosystem services from counties' federal lands as an opportunity to provide a compelling rationale for sustainable funding for county payments, while also contributing to protecting and restoring the health of our large, public landscapes.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.