

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

Testimony

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Good Morning! My name is Robert E. Douglas and I currently serve as the Tehama County Superintendent of Schools in Red Bluff, California. I have been a school administrator in forest counties since 1974, first in Plumas County, home of the Quincy Library group project, and for the last nine years in Tehama County, home of Lassen Volcanic National Park. I am here today to share with you our experience during the last decade. I am also here to share with you the recommendations of the National Forest Counties and School Coalition since my office serves as the administrative entity for this new and rapidly growing organization.

As a teacher, I always told my science students that a picture was worth a thousand words. So today I want to start my testimony with a picture of our National Forest Reserve Receipts since 1975. Exhibit I in your packet, displays the total U.S. Forest Service Revenues from timber from 1975 through 1998. As you can readily see, the receipts have plummeted since 1989. This slippery slope represents a 66% decline. If this was a ski slope it would be marked with double diamonds and danger signs would be prominently posted everywhere! Perhaps that is not so far fetched, because when one extends the current trend line it declines to zero shortly after the start of the new Century. For rural schools and counties, nothing could be more dangerous. Incidentally, when one looks at the data in constant dollar values, only twice since World War II have we produced less value in revenues from our National Forests than we did in 1998 - once in 1982, during the height of the recession, and then way back in 1958. Now these are National statistics, and they camouflage to a large extent even more serious effects that are occurring in some of our counties.

In my neck of the woods, things are a lot worse. Exhibit II displays the Plumas and Tehama Counties data from 1986-1998. In Plumas County, receipts totaled \$8.8 million in 1992 - \$4.4 million apiece for both schools and county roads. In 1998, total receipts were \$1.4 million, with \$700 thousand being shared with both roads and schools, a decline in six years of 84%. If the mother of invention truly is necessity then you

now know why the Quincy Library Group Project was created. In Tehama County, our receipts have declined by 64% from \$2.4 million to \$860 thousand in 1998. Our decline is less precipitous only because, about one third of our county is protected by the Northwest Spotted Owl Safety Net which expires in 2003. Without this protection, our decline would mirror in percentage that of Plumas County.

Statistics and graphs however, mask the real effects of this decade of economic terror. In our counties and schools these declines in revenue and forest production have had a Godzilla-like effect.

1. Teachers have been laid off.
2. Textbook and instructional materials budgets have been slashed.
3. Bus transportation has been curtailed or discontinued.
4. Art and music programs have been curtailed and/or eliminated
5. Lifetime recreation and sports programs have been eliminated.
6. Athletic and student activity programs have been cut.
7. Secondary and middle school elective programs have been restricted or discontinued (vocational/technical electives).
8. The number of periods of instruction per day in school schedules have been reduced.
9. Nursing, counseling, and psychological services have been reduced or eliminated.
10. Curriculum and assessment development services have been reduced or eliminated.
11. Library and media services have been reduced.
12. Administrative, supervisory, and consultation services have been curtailed.

Virtually every part of the school system in forest county school districts has been effected by these draconian reductions. It is an understatement to say that the quality of rural schools has been attacked by federal government indifference and insensitivity to the consequences of their forest management policies. Rural forest county schools are and have been held hostage to the emotional and polarized debates over our National Forest Management Policies.

Each year during the last decade, as the data depicts, the situation has become more ominous in the eyes of rural educators. Hope has now turned to despair and in some cases desperation. In our view, this destructive downward spiral must be arrested and stabilized. For this reason, school leaders and county government leaders have come together in 1999 to form the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition. This new organization now has a membership of over 380 groups and entities from 28 states, joined together because of our common concern about federal forest management policies and the extremely destructive effects they are having on our rural schools, county governments, and the social and economic stability of our local communities. The very foundations of our rural heritage, lifestyle, and our children's futures are being threatened by these policies.

The National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition is based on a sound set of common sense conservation principles to which all member organizations subscribe.

First and foremost, our Coalition firmly believes that the cornerstone of our Principles is the health and productivity of our federal forests - a position which we vigorously advocate that is of vital importance now, and in the future. We strongly believe that the creators of the U.S. National Forest System expected that::

A. Forest resources would be managed in such an environmentally responsible manner, that they would produce long-term sustainable revenue to share with schools and counties and continue to produce products for our nation.

B. The revenue loss to forest counties and schools, because of this federal land removal from private ownership and revenue production would be mitigated by sharing 25% of the receipts from the management of these lands or 50% from certain Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands.

This agreement to mitigate the negative local school and county revenue effects constituted a federal compact with the citizens of our rural counties almost 100 years ago. Until the late 1980's Uncle Sam kept his word. Since then, the picture tells the story. Current federal forest management policies and administrative directives are clearly inconsistent with these original tenets.

We recognize that these issues are complex and emotional. We urge the Congress to consider the following principles set forth by our Coalition as the essential elements of a fair and just resolution:

1. All forest counties nationwide should be treated equitably. Currently the Northwest Spotted Owl Protection Counties in Oregon, Washington, and Northern California are partially protected from declining revenues. All others in our nation are totally unprotected.
2. The current laws regarding payments to states should remain untouched. Specifically, the Coalition is adamantly opposed to decoupling or disconnecting county and school payments from actual gross forest receipts. We believe that the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management must continue to have incentives to manage the National Forests for the production of materials for the nation, to generate resources for the Treasury and payments to counties and schools and be diligent about the active healthy management of our National Forests. It is possible to have sustained yield multiple-use forests which produce materials for our Nation, revenue to support local community infrastructures, provide the economic and social vertebrae for local communities, and simultaneously provide wildland fire protection, pure watersheds to sustain our urban and suburban population centers, and maintain ecologically healthy forests. These are mutually compatible and not mutually exclusive goals. There are those in our society today that are spending millions of advertising and public relations dollars to convince us that this is an "either/or situation" when in reality, we know that these goals are compatible.

We submit that the solution is a two stage process:

For the short-term we believe that a National Safety-Net Payment System to States and thus to counties and schools should be enacted and based upon 100% of the average of the three highest revenue years since 1986. Payments should be based on either the special calculated payment amount or the actual gross forest revenues, whichever is higher, and payments should be indexed to a CPL to provide protection from inflation.

For the longer term we remain convinced that the answer lies in defining a solution which provides for active, sustained, and healthy management of our federal forest lands and a return to the sharing of gross forest receipts. In our view, this long-term solution must:

- A. Be in accord with a definition of sustainable forest management, wherein ecological, economic, and social factors will receive equal consideration in the management of the National Forests.
- B. Recognize the need for sustainable economic self sufficiency of rural communities through the best use of the natural resources whether for farming, grazing, mining, timber harvest, recreation, or aesthetics.
- C. Promote local government coordination and community-based partnerships. The Congress and the President are commended for their proactive support of the Quincy Library Group Project, as a prototype for future effective forest management policy.
- D. Provide for total forest management which considers the principle of multiple use and other factors as they relate to total systemic and sustainable forest health, based on current best science, using independent critical peer review.

We firmly believe that reasonable, thoughtful, fair-minded, and patriotic citizens will continue to embrace these Principles in ever increasing numbers, and we encourage Congress to enact legislation during the 106th Congress which incorporates these common sense conservation solutions to this devastating problem in our forest counties and schools.

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