

TESTIMONY OF

THE HONORABLE BILL HANSELL
COMMISSIONER
UMATILLA COUNTY, OREGON

CONCERNING

H.R. 517, THE SECURE RURAL SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY SELF-
DETERMINATION REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2005

ON BEHALF OF

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

&

THE NATIONAL FOREST COUNTIES & SCHOOLS COALITION

BEFORE

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS & FOREST HEALTH

OF

THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MAY 11, 2005

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Udall and distinguished members of the subcommittee. My name is Bill Hansell and I am the Vice Chairman of the Board of Commissioners of Umatilla County in the State of Oregon. Umatilla County is located 200 miles east of Portland, in the great 2nd Congressional District of Oregon. Umatilla County is a rural county, and includes the western slope of the Blue Mountains. We share two national forests with our neighbor counties, the Wallowa Whitman, and the Umatilla National Forests.

I am testifying today as President Elect of the National Association of Counties (NACo), the only national organization representing America's 3,066 counties. It is also my privilege today to represent the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition (NFCSC). NFCSC is a broad-based umbrella organization of over 1,100 organizations nationwide, representing the interests of people who live and work in 750 forest counties nationwide and over 4,400 school districts in 37 states.

I thank the subcommittee for scheduling this hearing and giving me the opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 517, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Reauthorization Act of 2005.

The reasons that NACo and the Coalition supported the enactment of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 (PL 106-393) were:

1. To restore the historic 25% forest reserve payments to county schools and county governments for roads, meeting the federal obligation under the 1908 Forest Reserve Act to support essential local community infrastructure.
 2. To reduce political gridlock and forest management at the local level by involving stakeholders in the active management of National Forest lands.
 3. To generate local employment through the creation of forest health improvement projects.
 4. To improve the health of our National Forests through active management.
- On all counts, PL 106-393 is a remarkable success story.

The county and school safety net under Title I of PL 106-393 has resulted in the restoration and retention of programs in rural schools across the United States. From 1986 through 1999, rural forest schools were devastated by a free fall reduction of over 70% in Forest Reserve funding. Teachers were laid off, counselors, nurses, music and art programs, field trips, elective programs, sports, and extracurricular programs were curtailed and/or eliminated. Some schools were forced to move to reduced instructional days or weeks, and some small isolated schools were even closed. For the last four years Title I funds under PL 106-393 have restored many of those programs and prevented the closure of isolated schools that would not have survived without this support

Likewise, as I communicate with my fellow commissioners and the county engineers responsible for road and bridge construction and maintenance, I am repeatedly told that the Title I funds provided to counties has allowed them to address the substantial

maintenance and construction backlog created during the 1986 through 1999 period of plummeting 25% Forest Reserve payments. County roads in National Forest areas are under increased user pressure as urban and suburban populations expand and seek more recreational opportunities. All of this increased use is creating an ever expanding demand for winter snow removal, road and bridge maintenance, and new road construction. Title I funds for the support of county roads has been put to good use.

In summary I would submit that Title I of PL 106-393 has completely fulfilled its objectives, and the need for continuing this support is even greater in the next seven years than it has been over the last four years. I say this because if the forest counties and schools had to return to support from actual forest receipts have now declined from 1986 by 87%. In 2000, when PL 106-393 was enacted, we had experienced a 70% decline. The need for Title I has never been greater in our rural forest schools and counties.

Title II of PL 106-393 is certainly the exemplary and revolutionary contribution of this Act. When Congress passed this bill most envisioned creating a mechanism wherein county commissioners would dedicate between 15 and 20% of their funds to create forest health improving projects on National Forest and adjacent lands. Those projects were to be recommended and approved by a broad-based 15-person local stakeholder group that by federal design had to reach consensus on project before recommending them to the agency for final approval. This was a bold public land management initiative. Today, we have 59 active Resource Advisory Committees representing over 150 of our largest forest counties nationally. These RAC's invested \$48.1 million in Title II Projects on federal lands in 2004. To date these broad-based stakeholder committees have, through consensus-based decision making, approved over 2,000 projects to improve watersheds, wildlife habitats, and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Simultaneously, these projects have created a substantial number of jobs in local communities and made significant contributions toward community economic stability as originally intended. Finally, Title II has reduced forest management gridlock through its consensus based decision making process. As I stated, over 2,000 projects have been approved. To date, no RAC has disbanded or melted down due to unresolved differences and conflict. None of us would have predicted this level of success. Even more impressive is the fact that to date no Title II project has been appealed or litigated. No other active land management initiative in either the Departments of Agriculture or Interior can equal such a track record. The lessons we are learning about collaborative public land management and local stakeholder involvement with our public land management agencies are very powerful. In our view RAC's are creating a new foundation and body of knowledge that will support the next generation of public land management initiatives. While it has been enormously successful to date, in our view, the most impressive contributions lie ahead of us as we learn to maximize its potential. An indicator of this is the fact that in each year of implementation the RAC's are bringing more partners, more funding sources, and more creative ideas to the table. Today over 30% of RAC project funding comes from outside partners. Projects are becoming more complex, treating larger areas of our National Forests and involving

larger numbers of partners. Each year our RAC's are learning to partner more effectively with state, county, federal, and private entities.

Additionally, it is important to remember that critics of PL 106-393 predicted that RAC's once established would act irresponsibly and authorize logging in old growth and roadless areas, propose clearcuts, and generally practice non-sustainable and irresponsible forest management. Nothing could be further from the truth. The record shows that no single project has been approved under Title II that remotely approaches any of these concerns. So, one of the real collateral contributions of Title II has been the creation of trust and the reduction of cynicism in our forest counties, and that has powerful possibilities for the future. In summary, Title II is reducing gridlock, improving the health of National Forests, and is contributing positively towards economic stability - one community and one National Forest at a time.

Title III of PL 106-393 has likewise provided funds to counties, which have been invested to great advantage. For example:

- Many forest counties have been able to offset the rising cost of search and rescue work on federal lands. With increased recreation pressure on our federal lands, rural law enforcement is being called upon to provide search and rescue support at a rapidly increasing rate. Without PL 106-393 support, most counties could not meet this demand.
- Conservation Easements - a number of counties have used Title III funds to purchase conservation easements to compliment efforts to conserve green spaces through their county general plans.
- Fire Prevention - a large number of forest counties have invested PL 106-393 Title III funds in developing fire prevention strategies and educating citizens in fire safe actions. Since the passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, over 100 counties have been actively engaged in developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans using Title III funding. These same counties will be investing Title II funds through the RAC process to implement their community wildfire protection plans through HFRA. We believe this nexus between Title II and III of the Secure Rural Schools and Communities Act and HFRA is an example of positive synergy and effective government.
- A number of excellent forest related education programs have been established with Title III funds.

While we agree that additional guidance and oversight is needed for Title III, we must hasten to add that most counties across the country have invested in projects which have made very positive contributions to public safety, fire prevention, conservation of green space and open space through easements, and forest education. A number of counties have used Title III funds to partner with public, private, and community-based/non-profit organizations to create important public service or public education/information projects. The guidance and oversight provisions recommended in

H.R. 517 will improve the effective use of Title III funds without compromising their creative and collaborative uses.

Allow me to make one final point regarding Payments in Lieu of Taxes. NACo, as you know, has long advocated for full funding for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT), if not through mandatory spending, then through the appropriations process. Last December, however, NACo's Board of Directors identified enactment of this legislation as one of our national key legislative priorities. This action places H.R. 517 at a higher priority than even full funding PILT. While it might seem surprising to some, the NACo Board, and county officials in the public lands counties, know that time is of the essence and that this legislation must be reauthorized before it expires in 2006. Secondly, they understand that even public lands counties which are not eligible to receive funding under PL 106-393 have received a greater share of the PILT money made available by Congress due to an offset built into the statutory PILT formula. Counties that receive certain federal public lands revenue sharing payments, such as those distributed under PL 106-393, are subject to a reduction in their PILT payment under the formula, making those moneys available for redistribution to the other public lands counties. If PL 106-393 is not reauthorized, nearly all of the public lands counties nationwide will suffer.

In summary, PL 106-393 is a remarkable success story. It represents public policy at its best. It is achieving its congressionally intended objectives of restoring essential rural school and county road infrastructures through the Title I safety-net. Essential forest health improving projects are being created through Title II. Title II funds are being used as a catalyst to attract other federal, state, county, and private funds which allow for larger more effective forest health improvement projects. The work of the Resource Advisory Committees is building trust, reducing cynicism, and most important building the capacity in our major forest counties and the federal agencies to engage in effective stakeholder-based decision making. Forest management gridlock is being reduced one community and one forest at a time. Essential services to educate and protect our public, to conserve open space in our growing forest counties, and to plan catastrophic fire prevention in concert with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, are being sponsored by Title III under PL 106-393. The legacy and accomplishment of PL 106-393 over the last four years has been positive and substantial. This law deserves to be, and should be, extended so it can continue to benefit the citizens of our forest counties, their public schools, and our national forests. Through PL 106-393 we are moving closer to restoring healthy forests and healthy communities in the forest counties of America. NACo, the Association of Oregon Counties and the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition recommend that you support H.R. 517 as introduced.

Thank you.