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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

Statement of Representative Doc Hastings
Ranking Member, Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Thursday, July 29, 2010, 10:00 am

DOC HASTINGS, WA
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TODD YOUNG
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

More than a century ago, the federal government began setting aside large swaths of land in what was the beginning of our National Forest system. Realizing that county tax bases would be affected by this action, Congress allowed these communities a share in revenue produced from federal forest lands as compensation. This arrangement worked well for the counties and the federal government for many years.

In the early 1990's, timber harvests in the Northwest began to suffer as a result of Endangered Species Act lawsuits brought forward by groups opposed to federal timber sales. In an attempt to resolve this issue, the Clinton Administration brokered the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994. This plan called for setting aside 80 percent of the federal forests in the Northwest and allow for some timber to continue to be harvested.

Even with the Northwest Forest Plan, environmental groups continued to file lawsuit after lawsuit to further limit federal harvest levels. As the area to harvest shrank, so did the economy that surrounded it – countless mills closed and thousands of hard working men and women lost their jobs. And counties that are impacted by National Forest land were left with no compensation for their eroded tax base.

County Commissioner Paul Pearce from Skamania County in my district is here. Over 80 percent of the land in Skamania County is publicly owned and only 2 percent of their land is taxed at full value. With declining timber receipts, students would have been faced with severe reductions in school services, including losing dozens of teachers, shuttering school buildings, and cutbacks in classes and extracurricular offerings.

In 2000, Congress recognized that many counties were faced with serious declines in their timber receipts and passed the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act. This law was a recognition by Congress of the commitment made by the federal government to these counties.

The Secure Rural Schools payments have made the difference for many counties that would otherwise not be able to provide essential services for their residents and quality education for their students. The current authorization for this program expires at the end of fiscal year 2011 and as that date draws closer we must determine how to address the future of these payments.

Thank you all for participating in the hearing today.