

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Testimony

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TESTIMONY

I am submitting this testimony to the House of Representatives Sub-Committee on Forest and Forest Health to help inform the committee about the detrimental effect that the loss of 25 percent forest receipt payments has had on the schools in Alpine County, California.

My school district includes the total county, approximately 725 square miles. We have two K-8 schools, one K-6 school, two Community Day Schools, and an Opportunity Class on the local Indian Reservation. We now employ 37 staff members in four different mountain communities.

Alpine County, California, is approximately 96 percent federal land, 92 percent forest reserve. When the county lost the ability to use this land for revenue production, the Agricultural Reapportionment Act provided a reimbursement to the county based on the revenue generated with timber harvest. The Weeks Law provided that 25 percent of forest receipts would flow directly to schools and roads in the county.

Although Alpine County Schools receive a percentage of local taxes, this amount is much lower (26%) than the average (52%) received in California because the county government is also impacted with the loss of land to forest reserve use. Only 4 percent of the county is available to local taxation. Historically our schools have been able to function as other schools

in the state only because we received forest reserve funding from timber harvest. Then early in this decade, timber harvest receipts declined drastically, resulting in a catastrophic loss of funding our school district.

Much of this decline in funding was the result of the protection provided for the Northern Spotted Owl. We do not have the Northern Spotted Owl in Alpine County, but the Forest Service made the decision to manage our forests as though we did. Cutting for any reason, including forest health reasons, stopped. Funding for our schools stopped. In 1994, we received about \$501 thousand in forest receipt money to be applied toward school district budgeted expenditures of approximately \$1.6 million. By 1996, forest receipt funding dropped to about \$148 thousand. Some Northern California counties were protected as this happened with the Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993. They received a formula amount to be reduced by 3 percent over a ten-year period, ending in 2003. Alpine County was not included. We simply lost over 22 percent of our annual school budget over a two-year period. The average amount received by schools over the previous ten-year period was approximately \$428 thousand dollars per year. Our loss compared to this average was approximately 18 percent.

Such a large loss in such a short period of time required budget action.

Of course we cut school administration first. I serve as both District and County Superintendent, and as the principal for five sites in the district. I am also the project coordinator, personnel administrator, curriculum director, and grant writer.

Because Alpine County is a collection of very small communities, I was able to hold a series of community meetings to explain the problem to the citizens in our county. We reviewed the school budgets together and took the following steps:

The principal of the Diamond Valley School was put back into the classroom 60 percent of the day. One hundred percent of the principal's job must, however, be done.

We laid off the mechanic for our transportation department. We now contract out for the school bus maintenance required by law.

We laid off two of our three school bus drivers. This required consolidating all of the local school bus routes into one. Some students must, therefore, leave home before 5:30 a.m. Other students are delivered to school thirty minutes prior to the start of school, but it is cheaper to hire supervision at school for non-instructional time than it is to support the necessary bus drivers.

We eliminated the lunch program at the Bear Valley School. In two schools, students now bring bag lunches, and we heat what we can in microwave ovens.

We eliminated classroom aides in two schools.

We then cut two of our eleven classroom teachers, one in each of two schools. This would have been a larger number, but California law providing for classroom size reduction in the lower grades supplied extra funding that allowed us to keep more teachers.

All staff development was eliminated unless it was supported with special funding.

Most conference and mileage reimbursements were eliminated, unless funded by special grants. This budget item could not be totally eliminated, because it takes from four to eight hours for me to drive from my office to one of my schools in the winter. What I did do was reduce the number of trips and now travel to those schools only when necessary.

We eliminated all capital expenditures and planned maintenance of school facilities. We have been able to obtain some grant money for maintenance and facilities, but this sometimes has had ironic results. For instance, we were able to put in a new athletic field including sod, sprinklers, backstop, and fencing; but we have no money for the athletic program.

All stipends for coaches and game transportation were eliminated.

We also canceled all academic field trips, unless these could be funded with grant money.

We sold off our extra school buses. Without the routes and field trips, there was no need for the buses, but the sale brought in very little money.

Of course, we provided no salary or benefit increases over these years.

We still could not balance the budget, so we eliminated our only full-time maintenance position and the school nurse. We now contract out on an emergency basis for maintenance work, and I hire a school nurse from a neighboring county on an hourly basis to do mandated work. This nurse must driver over a mountain pass in the winter, and quite often cannot get to the schools.

It is important to understand that cutting district programs in this way has had an even deeper impact. One of the administrative positions cut was our Native American Liaison. Over 50 percent of the student body in our largest Diamond Valley School is from the local Washoe Indian Reservation. This was a very important position, and it would be very difficult for me to effectively explain the impact its loss has had on our district. As you might imagine, any layoffs in a very small district also had very negative effects within the larger community itself. People who had been employed in positions with our district for many years were suddenly let go.

Safety issues were also involved. For instance, the new bus routes required students to arrive at stops before 6:00 a.m. during the winter in literally blizzard conditions. The families did not appreciate this, of course; but they have rallied and take turns waiting at the bus stops in cars with the children until the one bus can arrive.

The continued loss of forest receipt money may force the closing of one and maybe two schools in our county. This could be done only if we bus the children further down the mountain to the next school. This would require transporting students over mountain roads in snow conditions. In the case of the Kirkwood Meadows School, this would include two avalanche areas and one mountain pass. The school cars and buses that travel these passes regularly do so with active avalanche beepers. Luckily, we have only had one bus caught by an avalanche in the history of the district. We certainly do not want to bus these children through such conditions unless we absolutely must.

We have investigated in detail closing the Bear Valley School, but have discovered that the cost of maintaining the closed facility and busing the children could have more negative impact on the budget than keeping the school open at the current funding level.

Another element that exacerbates our financial situation is the growth in our special education population. In our largest school, substance abuse has resulted in a large number of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome children, increasing our current special education population in that school to about 30 percent. I am sure that you are aware that federal law requires that we serve these children regardless of cost, and the cost for residential placement is particularly high.

Of course, any time a public school district goes through layoffs, there are litigation and labor issues involved. This resulted in additional legal costs to the district that further impacted the budget.

In the last couple of years, another development has occurred that we really did not anticipate. As the school district was forced to cut programs and personnel, the local communities became concerned about the quality of education. As a result, several families have moved. In the case of our Bear Valley School, a school of 31 students dropped to 7 students. We considered closing the school, but not all families can leave the community because of local need. The children that are left still need a school.

Then there is the impact on the surviving staff. Even though programs have been cut, the recent increase in educational reforms, particularly in the State of California, has increased the amount of work necessary within the school district. Nor does the public expect to see decreases in services, even though people have been laid off. Those employees who are left are expected to do even more with less. This has resulted in additional resignations and, in some cases,

terminations.

I also think it is important to understand that Alpine County is without a community-based timber industry. We have no lumber mills in Alpine County, and there are few of the related businesses. But even without that industry, the loss of 25 percent receipt funding has been catastrophic to our school district.

I have colleagues in other counties in California who do have timber industry and have seen additional impacts. Entire school populations have, overnight, gone to free and reduced lunches. Spousal and child abuse cases have increased. All of this further taxes these school districts in terms of the services that they need to provide. It also has impact on local county services that usually work in conjunction with the schools, like mental health and social services.

In my opinion, this issue is a very simple one. When the forest was claimed by the federal government as forest reserve, a bargain that we call the "Compact with the People" was struck. In return for the potential revenue loss to local government, a formula was provided so that money would flow to the small rural impacted counties. For admittedly complicated reasons, that funding quit flowing. Now forest communities and schools are dying. Every year that the federal government fails to act, is another year that school children go without programs to which they are entitled. It is another year that schools close. It is another year that endangers the very existence of small forest communities.

I am here today as a school administrator. I hope I have given you an idea of how the loss of this revenue has impacted our district. After talking to other school people across the nation, from southern Florida to West Virginia and Pennsylvania through New Mexico to California and Alaska, I can tell you that their story is very similar, and in some cases, far worse.

There is, however, one additional tragedy that I feel it necessary to mention. If you enter my county over Echo Summit and look down into Christmas Valley on your right, you will notice that 25 percent of the forest is dead. At the beginning of this decade, we went through a series of drought years complicated with a beetle infestation. Of course, that forest is now at a very high risk for fire. And nothing is being done to remedy the situation. I think it is important for all of us to understand the breakdown of the forest reserve mechanism for funding to counties and schools is not only impacting the rural communities in our forests, it is also, in a very real way, threatening the very existence of those forests,

Whatever the solution, it must come fast. If the complexity of this issue requires more consideration, then a short-term temporarily solution must be put in place this year while the debate continues. If this does not happen, the final fix will be too late for many children in many schools in many communities.

Thank you for your attention. I respectfully request that my written testimony be entered in to the hearing record. I will remain available at your convenience to provide any further information you might need to make a decision toward a solution to this problem.

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