

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

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### Witness Testimony

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Testimony of

**F. Phillip Davis**

Commissioner, Valley County Board of Commissioners, Valley County, Idaho

Before the Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, Committee on Resources

U.S. House of Representatives

May 20, 1999

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Phil Davis and I am a member of the Board of Commissioners of Valley County, Idaho. Valley County is comprised of 2,354,048 total acres with 88.1% owned by the Federal Government, 3.2% owned by the State of Idaho, leaving only 8.7% in private ownership. Our 1997 population is estimated to be 8,099. Our summertime population reaches up to 30,000. My comments today were prepared in conjunction with the Idaho Association of Counties, a non-profit service organization representing all forty-four of Idaho's counties.

I am here to speak on behalf of the bill proposed by the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition.

My support, and that of my fellow county elected officials from Idaho, was hard won. We were initially very skeptical of any proposal that seemed anything like the Administration's "decoupling" proposal.

After much discussion and negotiation, we were persuaded that this legislation does accomplish some important short-term goals. It also provides a mechanism for finding solutions to long-term problems. And it accomplishes both without violating the hundred-year-old compact established between the National Government and local governments.

Allow me to elaborate by outlining the principles we in Valley County and in the Idaho Association of Counties have applied as we sought to evaluate this bill.

First, we believe that the Federal Government is obligated to forest counties to help to provide the means for them to fulfill their duty to providing basic services to citizens and visitors. This principle was part of the Forest Service's Organic Act before the turn of the last century. Gifford Pinchot and Secretary of Agriculture James Wilson explained:

"What happens to county taxes? People who are unfamiliar with the laws about National Forests often argue that they work a hardship on the counties in which they lie by withdrawing a great deal of land from

taxation...The National Government of course pays no taxes. But it does something better. It pays those counties in which the forests are located 10 percent of all receipts from the sale of timber, use of the range, and various other uses, and it does it every year. It is a sure and steady income, because the resources of the National Forest are used in such a way that they keep coming without a break...Thus a county which is covered by a National Forest is better off than one that is not."

The architects of the National Forest system promised the American people that their natural resources would be managed so as to ensure a sustainable yield, which would in turn provide a predictable and steady source of income to the local governments for the provision of basic services. Congress has never repudiated that promise.

Our second principle flows directly from the first. We stand adamantly, firmly and foursquare in opposition to the abrogation of that promise - and the violation of that trust - by means of "decoupling". The Administration's plan to "remove the doubt" from our budgeting process and to give us a guaranteed payment "decoupled" from actual timber receipts can only be greeted with much skepticism. The fact is that no appropriation from Congress can even come close to compensating our communities for their lost economies due to the Forest Service's current management direction. In fact, accepting such a payment would be a betrayal of the friends and neighbors who elected us. More serious is the perception that this is the solution. It does not reflect that the real problem is ecosystem health. "Decoupling" is simply not an option.

The beauty of this legislation is that it allows us to be true to both principles without being blind to the realities of the present situation. We welcome some relief for our distressed communities and schools. Without it we are increasingly unable to provide the basic services we must provide our citizens, students and visitors to our county - many of who come to Valley County to enjoy the recreational opportunities provided by the National Forest. We as county commissioners are faced with the unacceptable prospect of providing ever fewer services or lower levels of service. This bill attempts to make up, at least temporarily, for the failure of the Nation to keep faith with Valley County by maintaining the "sure and steady income" Pinchot promised us.

But this remedial aspect is not the main reason my colleagues in Idaho have sent me here to urge passage of this legislation. We are excited about the provision for a committee of federal land managers at the highest levels and state and local representatives to work towards crafting a long-term strategy for land and resource management. The guidance language provides unambiguous direction to the committee to seek long-term solutions that are true to the original intent of Congress regarding the National Forests, without ignoring advances in the science of ecology. I firmly believe that forests can be managed in such a way so as both to improve forest and ecosystem health and to provide a sustainable yield of forest products for the good of our local communities and of our Nation.

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