

The Honorable Ron Walter
Commissioner
Chelan County, WA

Testimony on the National Forest and County Revenue, Schools and Jobs Act of 2011 before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

September 22, 2011

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today to speak in favor of the proposal. I am Ron Walter, a County Commissioner from Chelan County, Washington State. I also currently serve as President of the National Association of Counties Western Interstate Region. Chelan County is a large county encompassing 2.2 million acres, 80% is managed by the US Forest Service. We are located on the eastern slope of the Cascade Mountains. Our Western border is the crest of the Cascade Mountains; we are bordered on east by the Columbia River. Our population is 70,000 with slightly less than half of our residents living in our largest town Wenatchee. The remaining population resides in 8 small cities or communities or in the unincorporated areas of the county.

Our major industry is tree fruit production or Apples, Pears and Cherries. Each of our small towns used to have a mill and timber jobs. The first two summers after high school graduation, I was fortunate to work in local lumber mills. The timber and agriculture industry – which includes grazing on Federal lands – were part of our local heritage and culture. Unfortunately over the last twenty years we have seen our timber related jobs completely disappear with our last mill closing several years ago. With that mill closure our county lost 80 family wage jobs and the related economic benefit to our local economy.

The entire Eastern side of Washington State currently has only four operating mills. I used to see logging trucks moving logs to the mills and finished lumber moving to market. Now the sight of a truck hauling logs is rare and most of the finished lumber products are moving through town on rail cars from mills in Canada. Livestock grazing is very limited. The most visible activity on local forest is now fire suppression.

Unfortunately this scenario has played itself out across the west. The Federal government has succeeded in effectively setting aside countless acres of wilderness but has neglected to properly manage the remaining holdings in the National Forest System. Our forests are in a state of disrepair – acres of once productive forests are now burdened by excessive fuel loads, susceptible to disease and insect infestation, and threatened by catastrophic wildfire.

Our National Forests hold vast resources that are currently underutilized, whether it is biomass for renewable energy or added value products such as pellets, timber products, minerals, oil, and natural gas. Counties across the West strongly request congressional action to return active management to our federal lands in an effort to fuel local economies and return revenues to the treasury.

Since I took office in 2001, I have witnessed countless attempts to address forest management and forest health, yet actions have fallen short of reaching the goal of achieving healthy resilient forests. This proposed legislation attempts to simplify bureaucratic process and red tape in an effort to reverse that trend. Walt Disney said the way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing. We need a new mindset of National Forest Management where energy production, grazing, recreation, timber harvest, mineral resource utilization and environmental stewardship are all components of obtaining healthy resilient forests which produce dependable and predictable revenue to the federal treasury, local schools and counties and produce critically needed jobs in our communities.

This proposed legislation is a step in the right direction as it identifies a pathway to expedite projects on federal land while ensuring the federal government protects its commitment to sharing revenues with counties and rural schools. Currently the Forest Service seems to be in a state of “analysis paralysis” with little resources actually reaching ground. It is time for Congress to change the status quo and provide effective means for the Forest Service to achieve one of its primary goals of “creat[ing] jobs that will sustain communities.”

I would like to take the remainder of my time to make some specific comments about the proposal.

In general, the National Association of Counties supports reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS). Furthermore, counties support continuation of three important goals or provisions under the Act: 1) active management and restoration of federal forests; 2) revenue sharing consistent with historic federal land management receipts with states, counties and school districts, and 3) collaborative processes such as the Resource Advisory Committees (Title II) and community fire planning (Title III).

The revenue sharing provisions of SRS are vital to local communities and represent a strategic intergovernmental agreement that dates back to 1908. The revenue helps fund rural counties ability to deliver public services to thousands of communities throughout the nation. We believe that reauthorization and pursuing management and restoration of the nation’s forests will generate tremendous environmental and social benefits and create needed jobs and revenue for rural economies.

I applaud the Committee’s commitment to continuing the Federal government’s obligation to honor the revenue sharing agreement with counties established in 1908. Historically payments to counties and schools have been coupled with natural resource management activities. This legislation attempts to return the U.S. Forest Service to the forest management business and explicitly provides clear direction to the agency on how to achieve management targets to fulfill current fiduciary responsibilities.

Specifically, section 102 (e) (3) directs the Forest Service to send Title I payments directly to rural schools and protect payments from being offset by state funding. This provision is important to a number of our rural schools districts who have had Title I funds diverted away by State governments.

Incentive and consequences; section 106 (b) (2) I fully support the section on performance based cash rewards, however there should be consequences if minimum sale levels are not obtained.

Catastrophic event; section 105 (c) The Secretary should be required to immediately implement this provision nationwide. Every Region to the USFS has a backlog of potential sales that have been through the NEPA revenue and are ready for bid and the demand for the product exists. The National Association of Counties has repeatedly called on Congress to give the Forest Service greater flexibility in their authority to address catastrophic events. Further, NACo has called on Congress to grant a Governor authority to declare a state of emergency when the severity of fire danger from fuels on identified federal lands within that state poses a significant threat to public health and safety. Many National Forests are clogged with dead and dying trees that pose significant risk to public health and safety. Conservative estimates show that perhaps 140 million acres of National Forest timberland in the west is in ecological condition Class 3 or 2: meaning it is ready to burn or soon will be.

Use of Funds; section 107 (b) I would encourage the committee to consider removing the restrictions on the use of the county funds for roads. Under the current authorization, schools are able to use these funds as general revenue. Congress should trust county government to develop priorities through our annual budget process and use these funds according to local needs and priorities.

Environmental review; Section 105 (d) Chelan county supports the National Association of Counties policies related to the need to revise and update outdated existing environmental statutes such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Administrative rules such as the Forest Service Planning Rule. Currently there is a critical need to modernize agency processes in an effort to increase productivity and efficiency, and to expedite project analysis decision making in a timely but effective manner. I support the Committee's goal to expedite the environmental review process and encourage Congress to move further toward amending and modernizing NEPA.

In closing I would like to again thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts. Counties are united in their desire to move away from direct annual SRS payments in exchange for sustainable economies based on management of our Federal lands. Elected county officials would prefer to share in the revenue from production in healthy forests that are a part of our community fabric, whether those lands are generating biomass or timber products, mineral, energy production, recreation or grazing. Effective management of our federal forests will create much needed, family-wage jobs in our resource dependent communities while providing sufficient revenue sharing to county governments and schools through the historic 25% revenue sharing agreements. However, until the Federal government returns management to our federal forests, we will require Congress to continue direct annual payments through the Secure Rural Schools program.

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva - thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning.