



To: RCRC Board of Directors
RCRC CAOs

From: Lee Adams
RCRC Chair and Sierra County Supervisor

Date: December 31, 2015

Re: **A Look Back... 2015 In Review**

2015 proved to be another busy year for California's rural counties. As Chair of the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), I am proud of the successes we've seen, the progress we've made, and the lessons we've learned this year. RCRC was founded more than 40 years ago to represent California's rural counties on issues that are unique to them. With more than 2.7 million residents and comprising nearly 50 percent of the state's land mass, the highly diverse geography of RCRC's 34-member counties range from forested and mountainous landscapes, to coastal areas, desert regions, farm lands, and vineyards. Recognizing that a "one-size fits all" approach to policymaking doesn't work, RCRC provides the rural county perspective on a myriad of issues throughout the state and federal legislative and regulatory processes.

While RCRC develops an Annual Report titled the "Year in Review" that covers a wide range of issues worked each year, I wanted to take a moment to highlight a few of the most hard-fought battles, incremental wins, and overall successes realized in 2015.

Early in the year, RCRC launched a multi-pronged statewide advocacy and public affairs strategy that garnered passage of 27 local Resolutions urging Congress to immediately pass a long-term reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Self-Determination Act (SRS). SRS is a critical funding source for California's forested counties and schools, where funding supports road maintenance and day-to-day school operations. In April, Congress enacted H.R. 2 which contained provisions that provided retroactive SRS payments for Fiscal Year 2014, and extended payments through the end of Fiscal Year 2015. California counties received approximately \$31 million in Fiscal Year 2014 and \$29 million in Fiscal Year 2015 for SRS payments.

RCRC has been at the forefront of the most talked about issue this year – medical marijuana. In the 2015 Regular Legislative Session, a three-bill medical marijuana licensing/regulatory framework package addressing RCRC's four key policy concerns was enacted. The package preserves local control, provides explicit county taxing authority, ends the collective model, and addresses environmental impacts associated with cultivation. The RCRC Board of Directors' adopted Policy Principles

regarding marijuana cultivation allowed RCRC staff to effectively advocate for these key policy concerns of interest to California's rural counties.

Just this month, Congress passed and the President signed the Fiscal Year 2016 Omnibus Spending Package (Omnibus). The Omnibus includes \$452 million in spending authority for the Federal Payment in Lieu of Taxes (Federal PILT) program - an estimated \$40 million of which is dedicated for California's counties. Earlier this year, RCRC staff executed an advocacy and media strategy that included the passage of 30 local county resolutions urging Congress to reauthorize these critical funds. While the reauthorization of Federal PILT has been an annual effort for RCRC, we continue to advocate for long-term funding and the return to a mandatory spending program. The Omnibus also includes an increase to wildfire funding to support wildfire operations of roughly \$670 million above Fiscal Year 2015 funding levels. While there is much work to be done on the federal level, Federal PILT reauthorization and an increase in wildfire funding should be celebrated.

The California Payment in Lieu of Taxes (State PILT) program was established in 1949 to offset the adverse impacts to county property tax revenues that result when the state acquires private property for wildlife management areas. Prior to this fiscal year, the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) had not made any State PILT payments to the 36 impacted California counties in well over a decade, resulting in arrearages of approximately \$19 million. RCRC advocated for State PILT in both the legislative and State Budget processes, and was successful in making initial headway prior to the final Budget deal. In the end, the 2015-16 State Budget Package included \$644,000 to pay current year State PILT. Looking ahead, RCRC will continue its efforts to advocate for State PILT arrearages, as well as reversing prohibitive language recently enacted that makes State PILT payments permissive instead of obligated.

In recent years, several of the state's Regional Water Boards have expressed increased interest in regulating discharges of waste from grazing operations, culminating in a proposed statewide regulatory program known as the Grazing Regulatory Action Project (GRAP). With no formal proposal, and no new relevant data or studies supporting the need for regulation of grazing operations, RCRC joined with key stakeholders in the ranching industry to develop strategies to halt the development of GRAP. After months of collaboration and working closely with the industry, the development of the program was officially discontinued.

On the transportation front, Congress enacted a long-term highway, bridge, transit, and rail funding bill on December 3, 2015, just before the short-term extension was set to expire. The bill, referred to as the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, is a fully funded \$305 billion, five-year surface transportation bill that largely addresses several critical county issues RCRC has advocated for over the past two years. Specifically, the FAST Act provides increased funding for local and regional transportation priorities and increased bridge funding for both on and off-system bridges.

Lastly, RCRC continues to serve as a voice for rural California, and was appointed to serve on two important working groups this year - the Forest Climate Action Team (FCAT), and the Tree Mortality Task Force. Under the direction and

leadership of Governor Jerry Brown, FCAT was assembled in August of 2014 with the primary purpose of developing a Forest Carbon Plan by the end of 2016. Also convened by the Governor, the Tree Mortality Task Force is charged with finding solutions to the growing bark beetle epidemic currently decimating California's forested landscapes, increasing fire risks, and creating a public safety hazard from falling trees in and around communities. Additionally, RCRC continues to manage the California Forest Watershed Alliance (CAFWA), an urban-rural coalition dedicated to the restoration and improvement of California's forested watersheds. Comprised of RCRC, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA), the California Forestry Association (CFA), and the California Farm Bureau Federation (CFBF), CAFWA spent the year advocating at both the state and federal levels, and finalized an overall platform, brand identity, and website.

While I am proud of the hard work that our organization has put forth this year, I am most humbled by the generosity and determination of our Board and county family. Our collective mission to enhance and protect the quality of life in California's small and rural counties brings us together, and our commitment to the goals outlined as an organization help us achieve that mission. I thank my RCRC colleagues for the opportunity to lead, I thank my Sierra County colleagues for appointing me to serve on their behalf, and I thank the people of Sierra County for their trust in me as a Supervisor.

RCRC's Year in Review can be accessed [here](#). To learn more about RCRC, or to dive deeper into a particular county-related issue, visit www.rcrcnet.org.