

Trinity joins statewide effort to push SRS funding

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Preparing to deal with the loss of more than \$3 million in federal revenue to county schools and roads if Congress doesn't do something, Trinity County has joined a statewide effort pushing for another extension of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000.

Through its membership in the Rural County Representatives of California that lobbies on behalf of 34 counties, the Trinity County Board of Supervisors has submitted its own resolutions in support of the group's advocacy for reauthorization and long-term, stable funding for the federal Secure Rural Schools and Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) programs in the new 114th Congress.

Prior to adjourning in December, the 113th Congress was able to provide nearly \$450 million (\$560,000 of which comes to Trinity County) in PILT funding for Fiscal Year 2015, leaving future reauthorization up to further Congressional action. Reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools payments was not achieved in the waning days of the 113th Congress, leaving payments for FY 2014 in doubt.

House leadership pledged to reform federal forestry policy in the first 90 days of the new 114th Congress which would likely include some aspect of Secure Rural Schools reauthorization and said enacting an extension would be an early priority in 2015.

Meanwhile, the Trinity County Department of Transportation is preparing a presentation to the Trinity County Board of Supervisors in February to discuss the specific impacts the loss of approximately \$1.5 million in Secure Rural Schools funding will have on the department in the current fiscal year.

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 has been extended several times, most recently within the Helium Stewardship Act of 2013. That one-year extension expired on Sept. 30, 2013, resulting in a lapse in funding for 2014 and future years unless another extension is granted.

The last one-year extension provided Trinity County with \$3,734,471 in total revenue including \$3,174,300 to split between county schools and roads; \$448,136 for Title II, forest health projects; and \$112,034 in Title I dollars for wildfire prevention, planning and educational outreach.

Lacking an extension of the safety net payments authorized in 2000 to bridge the gap forested counties were suffering as national forest land management shifted away from timber production, federal payments to those counties will default back to 25 percent of receipts generated from national forest activities within their borders. For Trinity County, that amount is estimated at a little more than \$304,000 based on a seven-year average of actual forest receipts.

The Forest Reserve payments were enacted in 1908 to offset the revenue loss to counties from national forest land not eligible to generate tax revenue through private ownership. In Trinity County, 78 percent of the land is federally managed and therefore tax exempt.

In its resolution of support for RCRC efforts to achieve a long-term reauthorization of the 2000 legislation, the Trinity County Board of Supervisors noted that with the loss of revenue to the Department of Transportation that once employed eight work crews to oversee 700 miles of county roads, the department will be reduced to two crews and “far beyond the point of being able to provide essential services.” It will also no longer be able to produce matching funds for any state or federal grant programs.

The board also noted that Trinity County schools will experience an enormous impact with the loss of Secure Rural Schools funding including diminished teaching and support staff as well as loss of classes and programs important to career paths and social development.

It urged Congress to reauthorize and fund the program “to provide a long-term, stable source of funding for counties and schools to maintain vital programs and avoid any interruption in county services and school operations.”

In a separate resolution, the county board urged Congress to reauthorize and fund the federal PILT program for several consecutive years as a mandatory program in order for counties to budget accordingly.