

Board urges Congress to reauthorize rural funding

Julie R. Johnson/Corning Observer | Posted: Tuesday, February 10, 2015 6:05 pm

Through a recently adopted resolution, the Tehama County Board of Supervisors is urging Congress to reauthorize critical federal funding to rural counties through the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000.

The SRS program expired at the end of fiscal year 2013, delivering the last payment of \$1 million to the in March of 2014.

And while it is anticipated Congress will reauthorize at least a portion of this funding in 2015, surety of the authorization, or amount of funding, remains uncertain.

SRS provides funding to school districts and road project to offset some of the loss of timber revenues in counties with national forests. First authorized in 2000, the Secure Rural Schools Act was an attempt to help counties and schools adjust to dramatic decreases in funding resulting from restrictions on timbering in National Forests located in their jurisdictions. After it expired in 2006, it has been renewed several times through 2013.

Tehama County Chief Administrator Bill Goodwin said California's rural counties have come to rely on SRS funding, more that \$33 million statewide, to support public schools and critical county road programs.

"SRS funding is critical to Tehama County's ability to provide for our residents, and its immediate reauthorization should be of the utmost priority for Congress," said Tehama County Supervisor Bob Williams, who serves as a Rural County Representatives of California Delegate. "In addition, it is time to look at a long-term, stable funding source for forested counties and schools to maintain vital programs and avoid an interruption in services and operations."

Years previous, SRS allocated millions of dollars to more than 700 rural counties, parishes, and boroughs in 41 states. The funding is said to have reached at least nine million rural students.

Many of these counties, such as Tehama County, are relatively high-poverty and have few sources of taxable wealth.

Critics say the SRS was intended to be a short-term, transitional program for counties.

In December the California State Association of Counties sent a letter to U.S. Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, thanking him for his support of SRS and his efforts to ensure Congress addresses fiscal year 2014 funding in the new year.

"As you are well aware, the immediate need in our rural communities for these funds and the risk of

failing to extend a proven program is simply too great to delay any longer," states the letter. "In the previous fiscal year, the U.S. Forest Service distributed well over \$32 million to 38 California counties."

Unless SRS is reauthorized, these will be the final payments to counties and schools in California.

The history of SRS dates back 124 years ago when counties across the nation expressed concern that "large areas of land designated under the 1891 Forest Reserve Act would not longer be available for economic development, thwarting all future tax proceeds intended to support local community development," the adopted Tehama County resolution said.

Congress took action to mitigate the impact on counties starting in 1907, and since that time several different federal programs have been instituted to off-set financial losses to rural counties, until now.

"In the 1990s, the volume and value of timber harvested on national forest lands was drastically reduced," said the resolution, leading Congress to enact SRS.

Through the resolution, the Tehama County Board of Supervisors said, "County public works programs will be crippled without stable, predictable, long-term funding supported by the Federal Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, causing the local road network to suffer long-term degradation, and putting communities at risk for public safety emergencies due to cuts in staffing and operational activities."

The Rural County Representatives of California Governmental Affairs (RCRC) is also working towards and developing efforts to encourage secure SRS funding in the 114th Congress.

According to RCRC, House leadership has pledged to reform federal forestry policy in the first 90-days of the 114th Congress, which will likely include some aspect of SRS reauthorization, and stated that "enacting an extension to the Secure Rural Schools program is going to be an early priority for next year."