

Guest view: Help needed for public lands counties

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Letters

By Anthony Botelho and Chris Lopez

County governments are on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic as they are running public health departments, responding to emergencies and maintaining a social safety net. As such, counties face enormous budgetary constraints due to the economic slowdown and ever-increasing costs to provide these services. According to an initial assessment by the National Association of Counties, county governments nationwide face approximately \$144 billion in budget deficits over the next year. The damage to budgets will likely stretch into future years as the economy recovers from this initial shock.

This new reality will impact San Benito and Monterey counties' ability to deliver critical services as we will not have the spike in tourism to Pinnacles National Park nor the Los Padres National Forest this year, which will reduce vital revenues on which we rely upon. Since these two Central Coast counties have large numbers of acres owned by the federal government, it means we cannot collect property tax revenue as we do from privately-owned land. In short, counties with significant public lands will get squeezed from both sides in the coming years.

It is imperative for Congress to provide relief to counties in the next coronavirus stimulus package, especially public lands counties. Congress can do this by delivering long-term funding to the federal Payments In-Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program. For over 40 years, the PILT program has provided funding to counties like San Benito County and Monterey County to offset forgone revenues from the presence of untaxable federal land within our boundaries.

In 2019, Congress provided Monterey County with nearly \$1 million in PILT funds while San Benito County received nearly \$300,000 for PILT. However, without mandatory full funding, PILT will be subject to the whims of Congress—and could fall back to past funding levels when counties received 65 percent or less of necessary funding for PILT. This would be a devastating blow to county services in areas with large federal land ownership.

Fortunately, Congress has readily available bipartisan legislation designed to solve this dilemma during the next round of federal stimulus funding. In the U.S. House of Representatives, H.R. 3043, the Permanently Authorizing PILT Act, would make PILT a permanent, fully-funded program moving forward.



This would protect county revenues from the unpredictable annual Congressional appropriations cycle. For the millions of residents of public lands counties, the case is clear. Without PILT, providing crucial services to our residents—and the millions of public lands visitors—would not be possible. We can solve this problem right now by including H.R. 3043 in the next coronavirus stimulus package.

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