

## My Word: Here's how America can help Humboldt

By REX BOHN |

April 23, 2020 at 9:23 p.m.

Humboldt County and its incredible people are working through the COVID-19 pandemic as best we can. Our lives have been turned upside down overnight, but these times are truly showing the best of us. These are unprecedented times and I want to go on forever about all of the great things our community is doing during this time, but I'll reserve that for the dozens of personal phone calls and Zoom meetings I have with you every day, and social media (because somehow I figured out how to do Facebook). Spaces like this though are especially effective when it comes to telling the state and federal governments how Humboldt County is doing and what their responsibility is to help, so that's the approach I'm taking here.

The coronavirus stimulus package signed by President Trump at the end of March provided direct aid to states and local governments with populations greater than 500,000. However, smaller counties like Humboldt will not receive any direct federal aid from this bill. The good news is the president signaled that he would support greater federal aid in the next round of stimulus funding.

Congress and the Trump administration should provide funding to local governments, especially those with large tracts of federal lands within their jurisdiction, like Humboldt County. Unlike private lands, federally owned public lands are untaxable, leaving North Coast counties particularly vulnerable to the push-and-pull of the economy. When our nation's economy suffers, tourism to our federal public lands such as Redwood National Park and the Six Rivers National Forest decreases, leaving us with even less revenue to meet our various obligations and provide the services Humboldt County needs.

The federal government can provide stable funding by including long-term funding for the Payments In-Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and Secure Rural Schools (SRS) programs. Since 1977, the PILT program has provided funding to counties like Humboldt County to help make up the cost incurred from the presence of untaxable federal lands. Some 61 percent of the nation's counties have some public land within their boundaries. Federal lands remain within our county year after year, and will continue for a long time to come, but it seems every year we have to wait and see whether the PILT program will get reauthorized for another year. Without long-term mandatory full funding, PILT will remain subject to the wild swings of Congress.

Humboldt County received nearly \$965,000 in 2019 PILT payments, and this was vital to provide fire protection, law enforcement and other emergency response services.

SRS supports national forest counties and schools that faced large reductions in timber receipts from the decreases in federal timber harvests over the past 30 years. Humboldt County received \$774,000 in SRS funds in 2019 — keeping our roads paved and teachers in the classroom.

Congress has bipartisan legislation ready to go that would solve these funding problems. In the House of Representatives, H.R. 3043, the Permanently Authorizing PILT Act, would make PILT a permanent, fully-funded program. This legislation would ensure counties do not receive the miniscule PILT payments from the early 2000s, and will have guaranteed payments in perpetuity.

An innovative long-term solution for SRS exists in the U.S. Senate: S. 1643, the Forest Management for Rural Stability Act, which creates a permanent endowment fund to support SRS permanently. Interest payments from the endowment fund would finance SRS payments directly to counties and schools moving forward. S. 1643 also makes some policy changes to increase sustainable timber harvests forests and would invest timber harvest revenues back into the endowment to increase the interest payments to local governments.

Including full, permanent PILT funding and the Forest Management for Rural Stability Act in the next round of coronavirus stimulus legislation would be a win-win for Humboldt County and other North Coast counties. I urge Congress and President Trump to immediately and permanently protect these important revenues to federal lands counties.

More importantly, I want to thank the people of Humboldt County for all the important work they are doing to weather this pandemic, and I urge you to continue to stay safe, check on your neighbors and support local businesses. Love Humboldt.

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Source: <https://www.times-standard.com/2020/04/23/my-word-heres-how-america-can-help-humboldt/>