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US Forest Service seeks five-year extension of Secure Rural Schools Act

WASHINGTON, September 22, 2011—The 2012 President’s Budget proposes a five-year-extension of the act that provides funding to historically forest-dependent communities that have been impacted over the last several decades by downturns in the forest-products industry.

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 was enacted to provide temporary funding to help rural communities make the transition through stark changes in the natural-resource economy, particularly in forest-dependent communities of the West. Under the act, rural counties receive funding from the federal government for schools, roads and other projects. It is scheduled to expire at the end of September.

“The Secure Rural Schools Act has kept many of our culturally rich and historically significant Western communities afloat, without having to rely on timber harvests,” said Harris Sherman, USDA Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment. “It’s imperative that we continue this program and protect these American communities.”

Two proposed alternatives to the Secure Rural Schools Act considered Thursday by the House Natural Resources Committee would do more harm than good, according to Sherman. The proposed National Forest County Revenue, Schools and Jobs Act of 2011 and H.R. 2852 -- the Action Plan for Public Lands and Education Act of 2011 -- would include granting millions of acres of public lands to states, or increasing timber harvests and mining on currently protected lands or be subject to litigation.

The transfer of U.S. Forest Service lands to the states would result in disparate landownership patterns and, as written, would likely remove current recreation opportunities currently available to the public. The diminution of the government’s multiple-use mandate in H.R. 2852 fails to address many key uncertainties concerning access, liability, and other issues. Atop inviting controversy and litigation, these programs would likely add to the federal deficit.

“We need to build on the recent successes we’ve experienced through cooperation and collaboration at the local level; efforts that are resulting in forest restoration projects covering hundreds of thousands of acres,” said Sherman. “These community efforts are occurring across the country and are actually increasing the amount of timber being sold, effectively stopping the decades-long decline in the Forest Service timber sale program. Developing projects at the local level with broad-based support has reduced polarization, leading to fewer lawsuits and appeals. The legislation before us today could put a chilling halt to these collaborative efforts and return us to the crippling polarization of the timber wars of past decades. We need to move forward, not backward.”

The Forest Service recognizes the challenges that rural communities face. The agency has worked closely with stakeholders to increase revenue in these communities while acting in a way that is consistent with environmental protection and multiple-use values. Last year, 2.6 billion board feet of lumber were produced from national forestlands.

“The national forests, for more than a century, have been valued by Americans throughout the nation, not only for their wood, mineral, and grazing resources, but also for outdoor recreation, as a place to recharge, for wildlife habitat in a rapidly developing world, as a place to enjoy historic, scenic, and cultural treasures, and for clean water to millions of downstream users,” said Sherman. “These dynamic values serve the urban public as well as the rural, the national interest as well as interest of individual states.”

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The mission of the U.S. Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. Recreational activities on our lands contribute \$14.5 billion annually to the U.S. economy. The agency manages 193 million acres of public land, provides assistance to state and private landowners, and maintains the largest forestry research organization in the world.