



## Secure Rural Schools National Pilot Program

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58, Section 41202(c)), included the following language:

*“(6) REPORT TO CONGRESS.—Not later 180 days after the date described in paragraph (5), the Secretary concerned shall submit to Congress a report that includes— “(A) with respect to appointments made under the regional pilot program compared to appointments made under the national pilot program, a description of the extent to which— “(i) appointments were faster or slower; and “(ii) the requirements described in paragraph (3)(C)(i) differ; and “(B) a recommendation with respect to whether Congress should terminate, continue, modify, or expand the pilot programs.”*

### OVERVIEW

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117-58)<sup>1</sup> section 41202 and the 2018 Agriculture Improvement Act (Farm Bill) (Public Law 115-334)<sup>2</sup> section 8702 amended the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000<sup>3</sup> (Public Law 110-343) to establish pilot programs to appoint members of resource advisory committees (RAC) for the allocation of SRS Title II funding. Members of RACs must be appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture or by an applicable designee.

- The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021) established a national pilot program requiring Secretary of Agriculture to approve or reject nominations of individuals within 30 days.
- The 2018 Agriculture Improvement Act established a regional pilot program designating Secretary of Agriculture authority to designate authorization to appoint members of a RAC to Forest Service regional foresters.
- RACs are community-based committees comprised of local community representatives who solicit projects from the respective community and submit project proposals to the Secretary for approval.
- RACs are required for allocation of SRS Title II funding (Public Law 110-343).

### BACKGROUND

Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 to help stabilize funds available to rural counties. Payments are divided across three Titles: Title I for roads and schools; Title II for projects on Federal lands; Title III for county projects.

The 2018 Agriculture Improvement Act established a regional pilot program for the states of Arizona and Montana, authorizing the Secretary of Agriculture to allow an applicable designee (Regional Forester), to appoint members to RACs. The pilot created an opportunity to streamline the review and approval authority for appointing members, with a goal to improve the likelihood of timely and successful reviews and approvals. The regional pilot program was implemented in September 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> [H.R.3684 - Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#)

<sup>2</sup> [H.R. 2, the 2018 Agriculture Improvement Act \(Farm Bill\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [H.R.2389 - Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000](#)

Under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, section 41202<sup>4</sup>, a deadline was established for Secretary of Agriculture to approve the nomination of members of resource advisory committees whose states were not under the regional pilot within 30 days. Previously, approval for these nominees by Secretary of Agriculture ranged from three to six months.

## **SUMMARY**

RACs convene to solicit and review projects submitted by the communities they represent. Approved projects are funded with SRS Title II allocations. Each RAC must consist of 9-15 members; each member must meet specified criteria defined in the legislation. Without quorum, RACs cannot convene to solicit, review, and submit projects to the Secretary of Agriculture and Title II funds go unused.

An efficient process for appointing members to RACs at the federal level ensures Title II funds are invested in the communities as intended. While each pilot maintained a review process appropriately aligned to its designated appointing authority, the regional pilot program demonstrated a more expedient appointment process to the benefit of the communities within their respective regions.

### ***National Pilot Program***

The national pilot program included 39 States, with the Secretary of Agriculture holding appointing authority for members of RACs. In the national pilot, prospective members of RACs were submitted from communities to their respective Forest Service regions. In turn, regions submitted nominations of individuals for appointment as members of RACs to Forest Service national office for review and routing to United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of the Secretary (OSEC). All nominations from 39 States were submitted through their respective region, then routed through the clearance process needed for OSEC review and approval. This approval process included five offices and took on average 33 days to approve once reviewed by OSEC.

### ***Regional Pilot Program***

The regional pilot program included two States (Arizona and Montana), with the appointing authority for members of RACs designated to respective Forest Service regional foresters.

In the regional pilot program, nominations of individuals for appointments were submitted from communities to the respective Forest Service regional office for which they reside. Since regional foresters held designated appointing authority, the review and approval process remained within the region. This approval process included one office and took four days to approve once reviewed by regional forester.

### ***Analysis***

Each pilot demonstrated a review process appropriately aligned to its designated appointing authority. However, the regional pilot program showed greater efficiency in appointing members of RACs. Designating the authority to appoint members to regional foresters demonstrated efficiencies in two primary areas:

1. Regional level review and approval required less clearance points for any given nomination of individuals. As such, the clearance process moved more quickly.

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<sup>4</sup> ...the Secretary shall appoint or reject the nomination. In accordance with subparagraph (C), if the Secretary does not act on a nomination in accordance with subparagraph (B) by the date described, the nominee shall be deemed (automatically) appointed to the resource advisory committee.

2. The volume of nominations of individuals at the regional level is commensurate to the RACs within a region's jurisdiction. In contrast, the volume of nominations of individuals at the national level is the aggregate of total nominations submitted across the country.

**Table 1: National and Regional Pilot Summary Data**

	Number of States represented	Reviewing offices	Average days to reach signatory official <sup>5</sup>	Average days for signatory official final approval
National pilot (2021-2023)	39	5	169	33
Regional pilot (2018 - 2023)	2	1	34	4
Regional Pilot (2023)	2	2	167	4

### ***Clearance Process***

The national pilot program was implemented in 2021 with a multi-step clearance process for nomination of individuals for appointment approval. Nominations were cleared through two Forest Service offices and three United States of Department of Agriculture (USDA) offices prior to final approval.

- Forest Service: Washington Office, Office of Regulatory & Management Services (WO-ORMS) and Office of the Chief
- USDA: White House Liaison Office (WHLO), Natural Resource Environment (NRE), Office of Secretary (final approval)

The regional level pilot program was implemented in 2018 with a one-step routing process for nomination of individuals for appointment approval. Nominations were directly submitted to the regional forester's office for review (34 days) and approval (4 days).

In 2023, the USDA White House Liaison added an additional step to the regional pilot program review and approval process. Beginning in 2023, nominations of individuals submitted to the regions were routed through WO-ORMS then back to the regional forester for review and approval.

### **SUMMARY**

The regional pilot program demonstrated an expedient review and approval process. An efficient administrative process builds trust and allows Forest Service to deliver results to rural communities more effectively. Regional foresters have robust, nuanced, and dynamic understanding of the regions they manage. They are engaged with their communities and are well-equipped to oversee and conduct the review and analysis required for RAC appointments within their regions. An efficient and informed RAC approval process ensures RACs are staffed at quorum and minimizes interruptions to RAC responsibilities for project solicitation and approval within their communities. This ensures SRS Title II funds function as intended, to the benefit of the communities for which they are intended.

Given the demonstrated efficiencies, the Forest Service recommends further exploration of future opportunities to maintain the benefits of both the regional and the national pilot programs and welcomes future dialogue on both processes.

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<sup>5</sup> The routing time involved follow-up interactions with communities to clarify nomination information and/or other administrative needs.