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United States Senate

February 28, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

I write to you to urge you to pursue reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program in the upcoming spending package in March. Rural forested counties have faced a sharp drop off in federal support since this initiative expired in 2015, and there is strong bipartisan support for reauthorization.

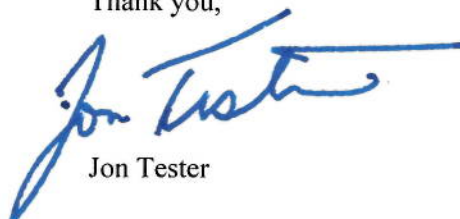
The SRS program filled a critical gap in federal support for rural forested counties. Historically, these counties received 25 percent of federal timber receipts for harvest on U.S. Forest Service land that would fall within their tax base. Due to declining timber harvests in the 1990s, payments to counties dropped drastically, spurring a bipartisan coalition in Congress to seek alternative funding streams for impacted counties. Since 2000, the SRS program has provided critical funding to Montana's forested counties, supporting schools, road maintenance, emergency services, and other essential local government services.

The expiration of the SRS initiative dealt a harsh blow to residents in these counties. For Fiscal Year 2015, the last year before the initiative expired, Montana counties received \$18 million under the SRS initiative. Since its expiration, the funding formula has reverted to a percentage of current timber receipts. The Forest Service has recently released its payment estimates for Fiscal Year 2017, which total just \$2.4 million for Montana. Communities such as Beaverhead County are facing a 92 percent decline in funding since the expiration of SRS. Local governments always have a difficult task in balancing their budgets, but these cuts break the bank. We must work together to reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools program as soon as possible, to provide certainty to rural county governments and the people who depend on them.

There is broad bipartisan support for SRS reauthorization in Congress. Legislation to reauthorize the SRS program has 33 bipartisan cosponsors. Discussions leading up to the recent budget deal included offers from both sides of the aisle to reauthorize the SRS program. The support for reauthorizing this program is clear and far-reaching.

I look forward to working with both of you and the large coalition of our colleagues to reauthorize this vital program.

Thank you,



Jon Tester

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