



Effort under way to get federal cash for Curry

Written by [Valliant Corley, Pilot staff writer](#) January 30, 2010 06:00 am

GOLD BEACH – Curry County Commissioners hope a letter from officials of the Western Governors' Association persuades members of President Obama's cabinet to support reauthorization of county payments to prevent "financial collapse in 2012, when payments will end altogether without reauthorization."

Association Chairman Brian Schweitzer, Montana, and Vice Chairman Butch Otter, Idaho, sent the letter Wednesday to the Secretaries of Agriculture, Interior, Education and Homeland Security.

"We are writing to urge you to support a multiyear reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000," the letter began. "If the Act is not reauthorized, it will result in severe budget cuts to education and jobs programs and to vital services in rural counties, communities and schools."

County Commissioner Georgia Nowlin said she is pleased.

"I know several association members have been working behind the scenes to convince the governor of Montana and the governor of Idaho this is important to their states as well," Nowlin said. "I know a lot of work went into them sending the letter.

"This is it," she said. "This is the year we need to get it in the 2011 budget to give us funding at the level we need."

Commissioner George Rhodes said that letter should have come earlier.

"It's about time the Western Governors Association got around to supporting this action," Rhodes said.

"It shouldn't be just western governors. It should be governors of all the states affected," he said.

"They need to get more folks involved in the fight to reauthorize the SRS payments. It's not a welfare program. It's payments to counties based on federal lands held by those counties."

County Commissioner Bill Waddle calls the letter a positive step.

"The fact is, we've been on a payment schedule since the first SRS payment in 2000. That has been a declining amount of revenue. Certainly, the costs of running our government or businesses have not gone down. They have gone up," Waddle said.

He said the last four-year reauthorization in 2008, as part of the president's stimulus program, was a 10 percent reduction the first year in the county payments.

"We're working on another 10 percent reduction in the second year, and the third year another 10 percent," Waddle said. "The last year, it will be a 35 to 40 percent reduction. How are we going to continue giving a meaningful level of service to the county with declining revenue?"

The letter says that when the National Forest System was created in 1907, Congress recognized that communities located in these areas would be deprived of opportunities for economic development and much-needed tax revenues.

"With this in mind, an agreement was reached that clearly promised benefits to rural communities and that agreement should not be broken now," it continued.

"Ten years ago, Congress recognized the adverse consequences of declining timber sales and agreed to provide annual safety-net payments to support counties, schools and roads based on historic timber revenue levels between 1986 and 1999," the letter continued.

"The revenue sharing provisions of SRSCA are vital but, just as importantly, it provides support for federal and nonfederal emergency response, wildfire mitigation, habitat improvement and watershed restoration," it said.

In 2008, the modifications to Title III of the SRSCA reauthorization exemplified the importance of building community capacity through the development of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. The CWPP collaborative process is effective in improving coordination and communication between emergency response agencies and the community, regardless of the event," it continued.

"Our rural communities are already facing a fiscal deficit due to higher unemployment and reduced revenue-sharing from our federal lands. Severely declining payments threaten serious harm in 2011 for many communities, and financial collapse in 2012, when payments will end altogether without reauthorization," it said.

"Schools and counties will be forced to: terminate hundreds of thousands of county employees; cancel thousands of teacher

contracts; close hundreds of libraries; and curtail or eliminate sheriff patrols, rescue operations, mental health care services and substance abuse programs. In fact, some counties and school districts will consider filing for bankruptcy," the letter said.

"Sadly, many rural communities are already experiencing high poverty rates and this correlates to a high need for substance abuse treatment and mental health care services," it continued.

"Today, the SRSCA aids over 9 million school children in 4,400 school districts in 39 states," the governors wrote.

"Stresses on service delivery capabilities are already resulting from declining SRSCA payments, with substantial additional declines each year, including a very steep drop in funding for fiscal year 2011. Without reauthorization of the SRSCA before 2012, these needs will go completely unmet in 2012 and beyond," the letter said.

"Western Governors recognize that the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act is an integral part of the states and rural counties ability to deliver public services to thousands of communities throughout the nation," the governors wrote.

"The Western Governors Association supports efforts that will ensure forest-dependent counties continue to receive a fair share of guaranteed revenue. We strongly urge you to make a commitment this year to include a reauthorization of the SRSCA in President Obama's FY 2012 budget," it concluded.

The letter was sent to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar, Secretary of Interior Arne Duncan and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano.

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