

The Bush administration slashes public services for rural America

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The failure of Congress and the Bush administration to reauthorize a law that provided funds to rural counties containing large swathes of federal land has precipitated a crisis that may devastate schools, libraries and a multitude of other programs in rural communities across the US.

The Secure Rural Schools Act and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS) expired last September. Since 2000 the program has provided \$2.9 billion to 800 rural counties in 41 states to fund programs such as land and water restoration, infrastructure maintenance, and forest ecosystem enhancement. But the lion's share of the funding went to support schools, roads and the general funds of the counties in which these forests are located.

The Act was dropped from the proposed 2007 budget last year due to concerns over funding for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the escalating federal deficit.

A last-ditch attempt to extend SRS for this year was incorporated into the \$122 billion emergency supplemental appropriations bill passed last month by Congress. The dire consequences of the Act's expiration became apparent after President Bush pledged to veto the bill because it contained a timeline for the withdrawal of some troops from Iraq.

Passed in 2000, SRS provided regular funding to the counties where the federal government had established national forest lands. SRS evolved from programs originally established in 1908 and 1937 to compensate—as well as gain support from—rural communities for the loss of the tax base on lands that went to form national forests. In return the government committed a percentage of the income from timber and other resource sales to these communities.

With the decline in logging in the late 1980's and early 1990's, due to a decline in construction, the

depletion of the more lucrative old growth stands, and environmental and species protection restrictions, federal timber sales dropped by 70 percent while income to rural communities from timber harvests dropped by almost 30 percent to \$70 million. The first effort to make up for this short fall came in 1993 with the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act to provide "safety net payments." This continued until SRS was implemented in 2000.

In 2006, the last year of the program, over \$385 million was distributed to 41 states, with the bulk of the money going to five western states: California received \$66 million, Washington received \$42 million, Idaho \$21 million and Montana nearly \$13 million. Oregon, with 59 percent of the state in federal lands, received the greatest amount: \$230 million. Other states receiving significant amounts were Alaska, Mississippi and Arkansas.

Accordingly, Oregon, with 33 of its 36 counties dependent on SRS funding, is experiencing the harshest impact from its loss. In Jackson County, in an unprecedented act, all 15 public libraries were closed in early April with 102 workers let go. With a population of nearly 195,000, Jackson County received \$23 million from SRS. Of that \$8 million funded the libraries, \$4 million went to roads and community corrections and the sheriff's office and its search and rescue operation lost \$4.5 million. A total of 172 Jackson County workers will lose their jobs by the end of the 2008 fiscal year—16 percent of its work force. The libraries may reopen if a May levy to raise \$8.3 million passes.

Emily Sheketoff, executive director of the American Library Association, described the closure of Jackson County's library system as representing the largest such action in the nation's history. Sheketoff said,

“This is the worst there has ever been.”

Lane County, with a population of 335,000 in an area larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined, will lose \$47 million from its budget and is anticipating the elimination of 260 to 285 jobs. Quoted in *Lane County News*, Alicia Hays, Department of Children and Families director, said, “The systems were already somewhat anemic and this closes services and reduces them beyond repair.”

She added, “The services we’re not providing now will cost the citizens more in the future.” The Lane County Board of Commissioners enacted a 1.1 percent income tax to replace part of the SRS money.

Coos County, losing \$7 million, has discussed closing their public health department or turning it over to the State of Oregon. The county anticipates laying off 100 workers, 25 percent of its workforce. Curry County, which is losing \$4 million out of its \$7.9 million budget, is considering a levy that will quadruple property taxes. The county approached the state’s attorney general to determine how a public entity can declare bankruptcy. Curry County commissioner Marlyn Schafer told *Worldlink.com*, “We don’t know what will happen. There is no precedent for this. The state has never faced this.”

Oregon’s Democratic Party governor, Ted Kulongoski, remarked, “Some of these counties are going to have to make some tough calls.” He said that beyond schools the state cannot make up the difference. Oregon schools will be losing \$33 million in SRS money. According to Steve Duin, columnist for the *Oregonian*, only 433 of the state’s 1,290 schools can afford a school librarian.

In California, 39 of 58 counties depend on the second largest payment out of SRS. At the end of March over 100 rural teachers and administrators have received layoff notices. Class size could increase to 36 students in grades 4 through 12. The response of the state has been to offer \$32 million in short term loans pending the reinstatement of the SRS act. Many counties are wary of accepting a loan since a failure to eventually reauthorize SRS will leave them unable to repay.

In the southern part of the US, Mississippi, still struggling with the aftermath of the Katrina disaster, will lose \$8.4 million.

Nationally 18,000 rural schools in 4,400 districts with over 9 million children will be affected by the loss of

SRS money. Up to seven thousand teachers may receive layoff notices. In testimony before Congress, Oregon’s Douglas County commissioner John Robertson stated, “Add to that the thousands of termination notices being prepared by rural counties and the loss of critical public services supported by those county employees, and you begin to get a sense of the breadth and depth of the catastrophe about to befall rural America.”

Efforts to renew SRS, which began in February of 2005, have, one after the other, hit dead-ends. In February of 2006 Bush’s proposed 2007 budget called for a five-year extension and imposed a 50 percent cut in the program. In March of 2006 Oregon senator Ron Wyden sought support for full reauthorization of the rural schools act. In May of 2006, Wyden, citing a “lack of concern at the White House and the inertia in Congress” threatened to block Senate confirmation of Bush’s nominee of David Bernhardt as solicitor for the Department of the Interior. Lacking any support from the Democratic Party leadership, the threat was exposed as bluster and Bernhardt was subsequently confirmed by the Senate. Wyden’s yes vote made it unanimous.

On the House side, Oregon representative Peter DeFazio attempted to add an amendment extending SRS for one year to the Continuing Resolution fielded this past February to maintain funding for the government. Again, opposition to his amendment came from the Congressional Democratic leadership. Walking in Wyden’s footsteps, DeFazio voted with the Democratic leadership to pass the Continuing Resolution despite the exclusion of his amendment.

For rural areas that have faced an unending loss of better-paying jobs with the shut down of lumber mills and other industries, where workers are twice as likely to have minimum-wage jobs than in the general US population, and where poverty is endemic but hidden in large measures by the news media, the failure of the federal government to provide funding for rural public services has devastating consequences.



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