United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 29, 2016

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
U.S. Capitol Building, Room: S-230
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Harry Reid
Minority Leader
United States Senate
U.S. Capitol Building, Room: S-221
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Reid,

In March of 2016, the last authorized payments to forest counties and schools under the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act (SRS) were distributed by the federal government. Today, we write to express our concern that SRS was not reauthorized for Fiscal Year 2016. The SRS program provides crucial support to forest counties, local schools, transportation infrastructure, law enforcement and other county services in more than 720 counties and 4,000 school districts, impacting nine million students across 41 states. Unfortunately, the SRS program expired on September 30, 2015 and has yet to be reauthorized.

For almost 100 years, the federal government has shared 25 percent of federal forest revenues with counties to compensate them for federal ownership of forests that cannot be taxed at the local level. Although these lands are exempt from property taxes, county governments must still provide many essential services to millions of national forest visitors each year.

SRS was first enacted in 2000 as local governments faced steep reductions in timber revenue sharing. Current revenue sharing payments are no longer sufficient to support the services forest counties must provide.

According to the National Association of Counties, when the authorization for SRS lapsed in FY 2014, forest payments to counties decreased by over 80 percent. As a result of the sudden decrease in forest payments, counties and school districts nationwide faced dramatic budgetary shortfalls. Many began preparations to halt infrastructure projects, terminate employees, cancel teacher contracts, and reduce numerous other critical local services. In that instance, Congress reauthorized the SRS program retroactively and provided full SRS payments to counties. However, in many cases services had already been impacted in counties and school districts.

The SRS program continues to be a critical safety-net for forest counties as we work to diversify rural economies, improve forest health, strengthen historic forest revenue sharing with local governments and ensure that our forests provide a range of values such as clean water, jobs, and wood fiber for local economies. We urge you to work in a bipartisan fashion to reauthorize the SRS program for FY 2016 and into the future and we stand ready to work with you in support of this important program.

Sincerely,

Mike Crapo
United States Senator

Jon Tester
United States Senator

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Roy Blunt
United States Senator

Barbara Boxer
United States Senator

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

Steve Daines
United States Senator

Joe Donnelly
United States Senator

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

Al Franken
United States Senator

Cory Gardner
United States Senator

Orrin Hatch
United States Senator

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Dean Heller
United States Senator

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

John McCain
United States Senator

Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

Jeff Merkley
United States Senator

Shelley Moore Capito
United States Senator

Patty Murray
United States Senator

Bill Nelson
United States Senator

Gary C. Peters
United States Senator

James E. Risch
United States Senator

M. Michael Rounds
United States Senator

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

Dan Sullivan
United States Senator

John Thune
United States Senator

Tom Udall
United States Senator

Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

Roger Wicker
United States Senator