

The National Forest Counties of Texas

Letter to the Editor - April 26, 2020

County governments across Texas and the nation are facing potential budget shortfalls as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. So far, the federal government has not provided direct aid to National Forest counties and other rural counties that include large amounts of public lands. Congress is currently discussing plans to deliver more aid to local governments in the next stimulus bill. The final proposal must include full, permanent funding solutions for the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) and Payments In-Lieu of Taxes (PILT) programs.

Counties and schools do not collect taxes on national forest land. When these vast areas of land were taken off the tax rolls, a commitment was made by the federal government to manage the forests to produce revenue which would be shared with local counties and schools. Due to reduced federal timber harvests, that revenue has gone away. It was partially replaced by the SRS program, but that program has never been permanently funded.

There are four national forests located in 12 counties of East Texas. Since 2007, the federal SRS payments to these counties and school districts have declined from almost \$5 million a year to less than \$2 million. They will go away altogether after 2020 unless Congress acts to reauthorize them. The federal forest land is simply not benefiting the local communities as it was designed to do. The lost revenue is hurting all our counties and school districts.

Congress has legislation ready to ensure this important program is permanently funded: The Forest Management for Rural Stability Act would create a permanent endowment fund to secure SRS payments while making key reforms to increase timber harvests and improve the health of our national forests. The increased economic activity would benefit everyone.

We urge Congress to include the Forest Management for Rural Stability Act, as well as the Permanently Authorizing PILT Act, in the next stimulus package so our rural public lands counties can continue to meet our governing missions.

Sincerely,

National Forest County Judges of East Texas



Don Lymbery, Angelina County



Jim Lovell, Houston County



Mark Allen, Jasper County



Greg Sowell, Nacogdoches County



Kenneth Weeks, Newton County



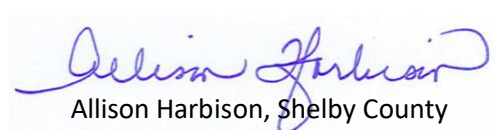
Daryl Melton, Sabine County



Jeff Boyd, San Augustine County



Fritz Faulkner, San Jacinto County



Allison Harbison, Shelby County



Doug Page, Trinity County



Danny Pierce, Walker County