

RCRC Pens Letter To U.S. Senator Harris Outlining Federal Priorities For California's Rural Counties

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Sacramento, CA...The Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC) issued the following correspondence to United States Senator Kamala Harris earlier today, outlining federal priorities for California's rural counties.

Dear Senator Harris:

On behalf of the Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), I offer our congratulations on your election to the United States Senate. RCRC is a 35-member county service organization that champions policies at the state and federal levels on behalf of California's small population counties. The greater distances, lower population densities, and geographic diversity of RCRC's member counties create unique obstacles that often require a more nuanced policy approach. For those reasons, "onesize-fits-all" policies do not work, and RCRC helps to provide the rural county perspective on a myriad of issues throughout the state and federal legislative and regulatory processes.

We look forward to working with you and your office on the issues of importance to California's rural counties, including, but not limited to:

- The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act;
- Federal Payments in Lieu of Taxes;
- Forestry Reform and Fire Borrowing; and,
- Improving the water supply reliability and water quality for our communities and farms.

Your leadership on these programs is critical, as California's forested and rural counties rely on funding from these programs to provide vital services to California residents.

The following is a brief synopsis of the issues identified above, and the position that RCRC continues to advocate.

Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act

In 2000, Congress enacted the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act (SRS) to provide funding for rural counties and school districts to replace revenue from dwindling forest receipts due to a national decline in timber harvesting. When first enacted, SRS provided nearly \$60 million annually to California's forested counties, with half of the funding allocated to school districts, and half of the funding allocated to counties for roads.

SRS initially expired in 2006, and has been reauthorized at reduced levels in subsequent years. This year, however, Congress has neglected to reauthorize SRS payments, leaving California's forested counties in limbo at least through April 2017.

RCRC supports the long-term reauthorization and full funding of SRS, as its funding is vital for the nation's forested counties to continue providing critical programs and services to rural communities.

Federal Payments in Lieu of Taxes

In 1976, Congress enacted the Federal Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) Program to provide federal payments to local governments to help offset losses in property tax revenues due to nontaxable federal lands within local governments' boundaries.

Counties containing National Forests, National Parks, lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), lands dedicated to the use of federal water, National Wildlife Reserves, and inactive or semi-active Army installations are eligible for Federal PILT payments. Federal PILT helps local governments provide firefighting and police protection, construction of public schools and roads, and search and rescue operations.

While Federal PILT funding is temporarily extended through the recently adopted Continuing Resolution, the payments are based upon previous years' allocations, falling short of the full payments California's forested counties have come to rely on.

As with SRS, RCRC supports the long-term reauthorization and full funding of Federal PILT, as its funding is vital for the nation's forested counties to continue providing critical programs and services to rural communities.

Forestry Reform and Fire-Borrowing

California's forests are at risk. The lack of active management on lands managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS) – nearly 16 million acres in our member counties alone – has led to unprecedented wildfires, decimating our forests, threatening our communities, and impacting our air and water quality, including the as yet unquantified degradation to our watersheds and their ecosystems.

Over the past two decades, the USFS has been forced to shift away from fire prevention and forest health activities to focus more and more of their limited resources on fire suppression. Ultimately, this system has created a large backlog of needed prevention and forest health projects that have gone and continue to go unfunded.

RCRC supports a change in the way forest management is funded. A system needs to be created in which wildfire disaster response is funded in a way similar to that of other natural disasters, such as hurricanes and floods. The Federal Emergency Management

Agency (FEMA) funds the response to those types of disasters out of a fund that is separate and apart from the costs of any preventative actions, and separate from any post-disaster clean up or mitigation of future disasters. Wildfires, however, have never been funded in this way, leading to “fire borrowing,” or the system by which prevention and clean up funds are swept into funding the response to the disaster rather than used towards prevention efforts and cleanup.

Additionally, California is experiencing its fifth year of record drought, resulting in unprecedented tree mortality and insect infestations. In 2014, 3.3 million trees were killed by bark beetle infestation, and more than 29 million died in 2015. Now, the USFS estimates that 102 million trees have died from drought-related insect infestation since 2010.

Dead and dying trees dramatically increase the risk of large wildfires, and create public safety hazards in Wildland Urban Interfaces, around communities, along roadways, and in our recreational areas. RCRC supports the removal of infested trees, thinning over-stocked stands of trees, and improving the overall health of California’s forested landscapes and watersheds.

Healthy forests matter to all Californians, not just those living in forested communities. Healthy forests provide clean drinking water, clean air, recreational opportunities, and economic development opportunities to residents throughout the state. RCRC continues to advocate for a common sense approach toward reducing the effects and severity of wildfires that have plagued California over the past decade.

California Drought and Infrastructure Reliability

Drought will continue to challenge California’s current infrastructure and how it is operated. While the last Congress passed the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act to address the immediate needs for financing and drought provisions, much remains to be done. Additional water storage, addressing flood management, identifying cost effective means to assist disadvantaged communities’ need for potable water as well as water treatment are just a few of the issues that will require a strong federal partner.

RCRC shares the view that federal investment in our statewide infrastructure, both natural systems as well as engineered, is critical to increase regional selfsufficiency for the state. Notable among these needs are restoring the health of ourwatersheds and groundwater aquifers to assist in meeting the needs of our economy and ecosystems.

On behalf of our 35 member counties, I thank you for your service, and look forward to working with you to improve the lives of those living in California’s rural communities. If you should have any questions regarding RCRC’s positions or perspectives on these federal issues, please do not hesitate to contact me at gnorton@rcrcnet.org or (916)

447-4806.

Sincerely,

GREG NORTON
President and CEO

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