



Board of County Commissioners

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December 3, 2018

The Honorable Michael Bennet
United States Senate
261 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC, 20510

Dear Senator Bennet,

As county commissioners of communities surrounded by the White River National Forest and comprised of 80 percent public lands, we ask that you reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools program (SRS). This program provides over 720 counties and 4,000 school districts in 41 states with funding to make up for the shortfall resulting from declining timber sales on federal forestlands.

Significantly for Eagle County, if SRS is not reauthorized our Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) funding will be decreased. Spreading PILT funding to cover current SRS payments would reduce the amount of federal land payments to counties such as ours. PILT and SRS are critical components of our annual budget; we use the funds for youth-serving organizations, for emergency services on Vail Pass (in the national forest and not in any emergency services district), and for critical county basic services. This revenue in lieu of taxes allows us to be good stewards of our valued public lands. Shortfalls in USFS funding have made local funding of forest operations more and more common – Eagle County and our municipal partners are funding a “Front Country Ranger” program next year to keep our USFS campgrounds open. Other neighboring counties fund Fire Rangers, trail rangers, and the like. PILT and SRS funds allow us to operate our counties responsibly.

We urge Congress to reauthorize SRS as a bridge funding mechanism until a more permanent, sustainable solution is enacted. If Congress fails to renew the long-standing federal obligation to forest counties and to the lands managed by the federal government through reauthorization of the SRS program, counties across the United States could face dramatic budgetary shortfalls. The last time authorization for SRS lapsed, in FY 2016, federal forest payments to counties decreased by over 80 percent on average.

Please include a reauthorization of Secure Rural schools in any end-of-the-year package to support counties with federal lands. We appreciate your assistance and your ongoing partnership with Eagle County.

Sincerely,

Kathy Chandler-Henry
Chair

Jeanne McQueeney
Commissioner

Jill H. Ryan
Commissioner

cc: U.S. House Representative Jared Polis
U.S. House Representative Scott R. Tipton
U.S. Senator Cory Gardner