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October 31, 2017

TO: US House of Representatives

RE: Support for H.R. 2340 - Secure Rural Schools Funding

Dear Representative:

Members of the Montana Coalition of Forest Counties are gravely concerned about the financial, economic and social crisis rural counties and school districts in national forest communities are facing, we are writing to ask Congress to act quickly on H.R. 2340 to extend and fund the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS).

Counties and schools in National Forest communities are in financial, economic and social crisis. This year deadly wildfires catastrophically burned millions of acres damaging forests, terrain and soil for decades. Wildfire smoke affected air quality in towns, cities and communities across Montana, Wyoming, California, Utah, Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Idaho, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Schools in forest communities began in September with school administrators scrambling to find air scrubbers to clean the air in schools and classrooms. Students returned to schools with fewer teachers and staff. Teachers and staff are losing jobs and leaving their communities. Nine million students in rural forest communities returned "Back to School" this September with fewer teachers, fewer courses and career options, and reduced extracurricular opportunities. These cuts negatively affect students and everyone who lives in or visits rural forest counties. County governments are cutting basic local police and fire services. Road services and repairs on rural community roads are being cut as temperatures drop and frost begins in higher elevations.

A House delegation met in Puerto Rico last week with local and FEMA officials to tour hurricane-damaged communities. House Speaker Ryan said "What we have seen here today confirms that this is first and foremost a humanitarian disaster." The House authorized additional disaster aid for states and communities damaged by hurricanes. House leaders were asked to give the same attention and support to the forest communities currently fighting burning forest fires on federal lands by providing short term funding for the Secure Rural Schools program. Unfortunately, SRS funding was not included.

Serious financial, economic, and social disasters are happening in rural communities in 41 states, 720 counties and 4400 school districts served by the Secure Rural Schools program across our country as RURAL CITIZENS CONTINUE TO WAIT FOR CONGRESS TO ACT TO EXTEND SRS FOR THE SHORT TERM AND TO ENACT RESPONSIBLE FOREST MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS.

The Secure Rural Schools program, based on federal commitments begun in 1908, provides crucial support for law enforcement, transportation infrastructure, and education. More than 720 counties and 4400 school districts in 41 states depend on revenue from the federal forests. Congress allowed the SRS program to expire on September 30, 2015. The last payments were distributed to eligible counties and schools in 2016. Without Congressional action, counties and school districts are now cutting vital county road, police and fire protection, safety and education services.

The SRS program provides critical bridge funding for forest counties and schools. We join in urging Congress to act in a bipartisan fashion to fund SRS retroactively for 2016-2017 as the 115th Congress continues to work to provide hurricane aid, suppress wild fires and improve forest management with policies that protect natural resources and improve forest health and provide jobs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Greg Chilcott', is written over the word 'Sincerely,'.

GREG CHILCOTT

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Montana Coalition of Forest Counties