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Counties Enmeshed With Federal Lands Score Wins in Spending Bill.

The legislation will rekindle the Secure Rural Schools program and beef-up Payments in Lieu of Taxes.

WASHINGTON — For counties with large tracts of tax-exempt public land and those affected by diminished timber harvest revenues from logging in federal forests, the $1.3 trillion spending bill President Trump signed on Friday is noteworthy.

The fiscal year 2018 package will up funding for Payments in Lieu of Taxes, or PILT, to $530 million. That's $65 million higher than the last budget cycle. It also authorizes the Secure Rural Schools program for two years. For many rural county governments, particularly those in the west, the programs can be an important source of funding.

"A broad coalition of county commissioners, teachers and school administrators got the message across," Karen Skoog, a commissioner in Pend Oreille County, Washington, said in a statement.

"Without SRS and PILT payments, many schools in rural America would not be able to keep their doors open," she added.

Under the PILT program, the feds makes payments to local governments encompassing non-taxable federal lands.

These lands comprise more than 90 percent of the area in some counties, limiting opportunities for generating local property tax revenue. At the same time, public lands can create costs. For instance, a county might be stuck paying the snowplowing and maintenance tab for a road that provides access to a federal area.

Secure Rural Schools was designed to help offset declines in federal timber harvest revenues in jurisdictions located near national forests.

It was enacted in 2000 and in prior years it has funneled money to hundreds of counties. Money from the program goes not only to schools, but also to county governments who use it to pay for roadwork and other basic costs. The program expired in 2015.

"The last payments went out in the spring of 2016," Jonathan Shuffield, associate legislative director for public lands for the National Association of Counties, said by phone Friday.

NACo and other groups have pushed in recent years to get Secure Rural Schools reauthorized.

Finding a budget offset that would allow for the program's reauthorization proved to be a sticking point as the spending bill came together in Congress. But in the run-up to the bill's release, lawmakers solved the problem, offsetting the expense of SRS with oil sales from the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve, according to a person familiar with how the legislation took shape.

The spending legislation will provide Secure Rural Schools payments for fiscal years 2017 and 2018. The fiscal 2017 payments are due to go out within 45 days from the time the bill is enacted. Shuffield said that fiscal 2018 payments will likely go out sometime early next year. Counties are not slated to get any SRS payments for fiscal 2016.

For fiscal 2015, Secure Rural Schools provided $278 million to over 700 rural counties and other jurisdictions, according to NACo.

Shuffield explained that one likely reason for the sizable uptick in PILT funding is that SRS payments have not gone out for two years and there's interplay between the two programs.

Route Fifty

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