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Committee on Energy & Natural Resources
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator:

On behalf of more than 3 million members of the NEA who teach and support students in public schools and on public college campuses in 14,000 communities, thank you for holding today's public hearing examining federal payments to local governments provided through the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) and Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) programs. We submit these comments regarding both a near-term extension and long-term reauthorization of the SRS program.

Schools in rural communities with National Forests have relied on federal payments since the early 1900s to make up for the loss of tax revenues on federal lands. In the late 1980s, payments in many forest-impacted communities dropped dramatically due to sharp decreases in federal timber sales. In response, school districts cut teachers, education support professionals, extracurricular programs, and school meal programs, and postponed building repairs. The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act offered a critically needed solution by:

- Ensuring a predictable payment to federally impacted forest counties;
- Providing vital funding for educational services for students in over 775 rural counties and 4,400 schools;
- Preventing the closure of some schools and the layoffs of school staff and other public-service workers; and
- Protecting funding for libraries, sheriff patrols, local corrections facilities, search and rescue operations, and mental health care services.

Unfortunately, SRS payments have decreased by more than 50 percent since 2009 due to a 5-percent annual cut in the SRS funding formula, from approximately \$480 million to slightly more than \$215 million in FY 2018. For this reason, the NEA strongly supports S. 430 to extend the Secure Rural Schools program and S. 1643, the Forest Management for Rural Stability Act. S. 430 provides the near-term stability to enable rural schools to meet the educational needs of students while a more permanent solution is devised. We urge Congress to include a short-term SRS extension, without the 5-percent reduction, in any end-of-year legislation that will be passed and signed into law.

S. 1643 offers a much-needed permanent solution to the SRS program by creating an endowment fund to provide long-term, reliable, and increasing funding, eliminating the need for reauthorizations every two years and allowing for more consistent budgeting. Together, S. 430 and S. 1643 acknowledge rural schools as community hubs that educate and inspire students, bring people together, and keep local history, heritage, and traditions alive. Their students deserve the resources we want for *all* students: a rich curriculum, activities that spark their curiosity, and support services that cultivate success. Once again, thank you for holding this important hearing on supporting our nation's rural schools.

Sincerely,

Marc Egan
Director of Government Relations
National Education Association