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Oregon Timber Industry Comments on Senate County Payments Hearing and Outlines Real Solutions

Portland, Ore – The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee is holding a hearing in Washington, DC today entitled “Keeping the Commitment to Rural Communities” to review the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS) and Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) county payment programs.

Tom Partin, President of the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC), is urging Oregon Senator Ron Wyden, who chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, to take action on meaningful solutions to restore active, sustainable forest management to Oregon’s Forest Service and BLM O&C forests. The data suggests that relatively modest timber harvest levels could generate county payments significantly higher than those expected from SRS while also providing thousands of new jobs in rural Oregon.

“If the federal government is truly interested in honoring the nation’s commitment to Oregon’s rural, forested communities it will promote real solutions to restore the health of our forests and the vitality of rural communities through balanced, sustainable management of our federal forests,” said Partin. “Merely doling out dwindling Secure Rural School payments clearly falls short of meeting the needs of local governments and does nothing to generate the private sector employment these communities so desperately need.”

Beginning with “Spotted Owl Guarantee Payments” in the early 1990’s and continuing through today with SRS payments, Pacific Northwest counties have received billions in often deficit spending subsidies from Washington, DC when all they’ve asked for is the sustainable management of the federal forests in their backyards. Secure Rural Schools payments have declined significantly in recent years and many Oregon counties receive less than half of what they received as recently as 2008. Rural Oregon now faces chronic unemployment, record food stamp use and insecurity from an underfunded law enforcement and criminal justice system.

Last month, Oregon Congressmen Peter DeFazio (D), Greg Walden (R) and Kurt Schrader (D) wrote Chairman Wyden asking that he convene a hearing to explore lasting solutions for Oregon’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Oregon & California Grant Lands forests, including their O&C Trust, Conservation and Jobs Act. The bipartisan House proposal would permanently protect all of the old growth on BLM lands while managing the remainder of the land on a sustained yield basis to provide over 500 million board feet of timber, over 5,000 jobs

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and \$165 million to the counties every year into the future. The harvest level called for under their proposal represents less than half of what these forests grow each year. Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber has also called upon the entire Oregon Congressional Delegation to promote this type of meaningful solution, but thus far Chairman Wyden has largely avoided addressing the issue.

“We hope Chairman Wyden will join his bipartisan House colleagues to develop real, balanced solutions for Oregon’s O&C counties,” continued Partin. “Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber has also called for federal legislation providing lasting certainty for Oregon’s O&C counties, but if today’s hearing is any indication it appears that the Senate is inclined the kick the can down the road yet again.”

Meanwhile, AFRC has provided an outline of the modest harvest levels that would be required to generate county timber payments nearly double of those expected this year from Forest Service lands if Congress merely increased revenue sharing from 25% to 50% and reformed how a small portion of these lands are managed. In addition to providing nearly double the revenue to local county governments this approach would generate tens of thousands of new jobs across Oregon’s hardest hit communities and provide additional receipts to the federal Treasury.

“The facts clearly show that you can provide significant revenue to local counties and schools as well as jobs in rural communities through the sustainable management of our federal forests, concluded Partin. “In most cases the harvest volumes are less than the volume of timber that dies each year, a small portion of the annual growth and a minor fraction of the standing volume on our federal forests.”

The American Forest Resource Council represents forest product manufacturers and landowners throughout the west and is based in Portland, Oregon. www.amforest.org