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# LARRY CRAIG

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NEWS RELEASE

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## **New Congress, New Beginning** **by Senator Larry Craig**

A blessing and a curse. There are some who feel this way about our public lands. While the national forests have provided a great many benefits to the public, which I enjoy myself, they have also created many challenges.

More than 60 percent of Idaho's landmass is federally owned, either by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In many counties, like Shoshone (more than 70 percent) and Custer (more than 90 percent), federal ownership of so much land quickly became a barrier to economic development. Without a broad economic and property-tax base, many rural communities in Idaho and across the nation struggled to provide services like road maintenance, libraries, and a high quality education for children.

In 1908, Congress reached a solution, agreeing to share with the county government 25 percent of the annual federal timber receipts harvested in that county. For generations, this arrangement worked, until timber harvests began to dwindle on public lands in the 1980s and 1990s. As a consequence, the timber dollars coming into county coffers did, too.

In 2001, I teamed up with Senator Ron Wyden from Oregon to pass the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, which set a floor on the amount of federal funds – or county payments – rural counties would receive. The program was a successful temporary solution, intended to help begin an economic transition for counties which were heavily dependent upon timber to a broader-based economy. While it was never intended to be a permanent program, the time has not yet come to end it.

However, it will end, unless we take action to renew the law. One of the many valuable aspects of this program is the historical collaboration of Resource Advisory Committees (RACs) authorized by this law. These groups have a checkbook and are actually getting projects done on our public lands. From building trails, to fighting noxious weeds, to protecting communities from wildfire, to enabling timber harvest, the RACs are making a positive difference. The loss of these committees would be a devastating blow.

However, the November elections sent a strong message that Congress must stop overspending and live within its means. I agree with that principle, but this has made it difficult to find more than \$400 million in the federal budget to fund the county payments program. I have spent more than a year trying to do so.

[MORE]

## **CRAIG Page 2 – New Congress, New Beginning**

I am skeptical that reauthorization of this law will occur in its current form. This is a new Congress with many new members facing new economic realities.

Make no mistake, though: I have not turned my back on reauthorizing the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. Let me stress that I am devoted to the principles of the 1908 law establishing revenue sharing with the counties and schools. At this very moment I'm working to craft a separate proposal that won't break the budget and will distribute county payments more equally. I hope to have it ready in the coming weeks.

I am working with my colleagues to ensure that, at the end of the day, the winners are the schools and counties impacted by this legislation. I remain committed to helping Idaho's rural communities grow and flourish, just like those trees on our public lands.