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LARRY CRAIG

NEWS RELEASE

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Back in Session – Back to School **by Senator Larry Craig**

The onset of September marks a season of change in the lives of Americans. It begins with Labor Day, the unofficial end of summer, and typically coincides with our schools opening their doors again. The memories of my children, and now my grandchildren, anticipating that first day of school come to mind. I remember their excitement as they packed up their school supplies and headed out the door.

For Congress, September also marks a return, only it is to the halls of the Capitol instead of the classroom. Like students, we have our assignments to complete, and right now there are some enormous tasks on that list, including critical energy legislation and more than a dozen appropriations bills needed to fund the federal government. But perhaps the most important and far-reaching is the now-expired Craig-Wyden Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act.

The Secure Rural Schools or County Payments program was instituted in the year 2000, but the law that precedes it goes back 100 years. In 1908 the U.S. Forest Service agreed to return 25 percent of the revenue it received from mining and timber sales to the counties where those resources were found. For nearly a century, that formula proved an effective way for counties with large tracts of public lands to make up for the lost property taxes from those lands. Over the past 20 years, those payments have declined dramatically due to increased environmental restrictions and consequently, a drop in timber sales. The original County Payments law restored the hundreds of millions of lost dollars to 4,400 school districts across the nation – schools that are now being forced to dramatically cut teachers and programs.

Many of these school districts are found in Idaho. Boundary, Clearwater and Kootenai Counties are all facing cuts of more than \$1 million each. Valley and Shoshone Counties' shortfalls reach nearly \$3 and \$4 million respectively, and Idaho County is looking at a staggering \$4.8 million. All told Idaho Counties have lost more than \$21 million, \$6.2 million of which would directly fund schools. To put it in perspective, students in 120 Idaho classrooms will show up on the first day of school, only no teacher will be standing at the front of the class. Instead the students will be shifted into other classes, dramatically increasing class size and diminishing the quality of education.

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Over the course of this year, I have worked to extend the County Payments program countless times. Unfortunately, election-year politicking and other issues have crippled those efforts. Now that both school and Congress are back in session, I will do all I can to make sure Idaho and the rest of the nation's rural schools have this critical funding restored. I only hope Congress shares the same enthusiasm and willingness to get to work as our students.

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