

Senate okays Rural Schools and PILT for one more year

The Senate March 8 voted by an overwhelming 82-to-16 margin to extend two assistance programs for counties with large tracts of federal lands within their borders.

The amendment to a major transportation bill (S 1813) would authorize the Secure Rural Schools program through fiscal year 2012 at 95 percent of the fiscal 2011 level. The Forest Service announced February 17 the distribution of \$307 million in fiscal 2011 payments.

The amendment, sponsored chiefly by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.), would also extend the payments-in-lieu of taxes (PILT) program through fiscal 2013 under the current formula. The projected fiscal 2013 allocation is \$398 million, according to the administration's budget request.

Both the Secure Rural Schools and PILT payments are guaranteed in the amendment and are not subject to further appropriations. The money would presumably be drawn from the \$40 billion-plus the underlying bill (S 1813) would allocate to roads programs per year. Most of the money would come from gasoline taxes.

In a release Baucus's office said the senator "pushed his colleagues to extend the programs as an amendment to the transportation debate because more than 50 percent of SRS payments went to roads over the last decade, and census datashows much of PILT is spent on highways as well."

The amendment has a way to go. The Senate will attempt to complete the highway bill next week. But the House is developing a very different surface transportation bill (HR 7) that does not, yet, include Secure Rural Schools and PILT money.

In another possible complication, the House Natural Resources Committee did approve a Secure Rural Schools bill (HR 4019) of its own February 16. However, the measure is fiercely opposed by Democrats and the Obama administration because it would rely on increased commodity uses of the public lands, particularly timber sales, to generate revenues for the county payments.

Beyond fiscal 2012 for Secure Rural Schools and fiscal 2013 for PILT the future is still uncertain. A half-dozen legislative proposals are in the works but all suffer from the same malady – a lack of sure funding.

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