

SAFETY-NET

In October 2000, President Clinton signed the *Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self-Determination Act*. The law had been in the works for several years, dating back to at least 1997. A western coalition known as the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition (NFCSC) advocated for the bill for several years and with the bipartisan support of Senators Larry Craig (R-ID) and Ron Wyden (D-OR) the bill was crafted and eventually passed.

The *Secure Rural Schools Act* provided what was termed as a “safety-net” payment to school districts and counties nationwide for replacement funding for schools and roads in national forested areas. The *1908 Act*, back at the turn of the twentieth century, had established an annual 25% revenue share to assist local communities with school and road funding. The intention was to help off-set the loss of property taxes created by the establishment of non-taxable national forests. In essence, schools and roads maintenance were “coupled” to forest receipts.

In the 1990’s, however, forest receipts fell dramatically (down nearly 80%) due to preservation minded policies and decisions emerging primarily from Clinton Administration regulations. The result was a sharp reduction in 25% payments, which in turn wreaked havoc on school district and county budgets. The devastating effects prompted the NFCSC to seek temporary relief (safety-net) until the Forest Service returned to traditional receipt levels.

The coalition was successful in its effort to get the safety-net passed primarily because of broad-based, grass roots support from across the country. Large national organizations like the US Chamber of Commerce, National Education Association and National Association of Counties along with hundreds of lesser organizations like the AFA joined forces to successfully promote the bill. It is also important to include preservationist organizations among the grass roots supporters, albeit apart from the NFCSC, because they were quick to recognize the safety-net for what is really was, de-facto de-coupling. Perhaps their support tipped the scale in favor of the legislation more than any other single element.

Once the legislation passed, a level of funding was guaranteed for six years during which time coalition members naively expected the Bush Administration to provide impetus to increase production thereby making the 25% payment viable once again. Unfortunately that has not happened across most the nation and as a result, the safety-net has morphed into an extended entitlement, no longer serving as a short-term fix (safety-net) as originally intended. In fact, it has taken on a new life of its own rendering timber receipts virtually meaningless, much to the joy of our silent partners. The net result is a dependence on an annual government handout, which is no longer “coupled” to the forest as the *1908 Act* intended. What a tragedy indeed.