

Wyden negotiates temporary SRS substitute into COVID-19 relief bill

Two-year program will benefit Grant and other timber counties

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden locked up aid money for Grant County and others with similar economies tied to timber and natural resource on federal lands.

The COVID-19 stimulus bill includes a two-year county and tribal payment program that would award \$2 billion in flexible funding for counties with federal lands and declining revenues due to federal policies.

"It will be a big boost to our county and all of our communities," Grant County Commissioner Jim Hamscher said in an email Tuesday.

The payments — for the time being — would replace the Secure Rural Schools Act payments for 2022 and 2023.

The Secure Rural Schools Act funneled federal dollars to timber-dependent counties in the West to pay for local services, including infrastructure and fire prevention programs, to replace former profits from timber sales on federal lands.

The law, which Wyden sponsored, was intended to be a six-year program but was reauthorized seven times.



U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden

EOMG file photo

The program expired earlier this year, and counties will receive their final authorized payment later this year.

Wyden told the Eagle March 10 that, over the next two years, he and a bipartisan

group of senators will continue to work on getting SRS reauthorized.

The new payment program is fundamentally different from the previous one. In addition to allocating tribal

governments annual payments of \$250 million over two years for the first time, the law changes the formula for allocating the money and which counties benefit the most.

Lawmakers passed SRS in

2000, after timber sales plummeted in the 1990s.

Each year, the program awards counties federal dollars using a formula based on a county's share of timber profits from the 1980s and early 1990s.

Over time, this led states with higher concentrations of national forests and public lands to get the lion's share of the funds.

Congressional research indicates that Oregon received a fifth of the total SRS payments in 2019.

Under the new program, the funds would be based on a county's level of poverty, unemployment rates, property value and other economic indicators.

The program calls for the Treasury Secretary's office to determine a specific formula for awarding payments to individual counties.

Wyden said he spoke with Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen last week and said "she is very much aware" the new program is something "quite different."

He said the only thing Yellen will be directed to do is to make sure the rules are based off of economic need and that no money is spent on lobbying.

Wyden said the program is a "fresh approach" designed to get rural counties off of a "financial roller coaster."

Hamscher said he would

need to see the formula's specifics and how it would affect Grant County. He said he would still like to see it based on timber receipts from the past.

"You still have the same road systems," he said. "But you're don't have the money to maintain them."

County Judge Scott Myers said Congress needs to come up with a permanent fix for timber-dependent counties.

"We are permanently harmed by it unless they permanently fix it," Myers said. "And this isn't a fix."

Myers said counties would be "permanently ignored" when it comes to their relationship to the loss of tax revenue on public lands.

Wyden said the goal is to come with legislation that will have "predictability certainty and broad political support."

In addition to SRS money, Oregon also receives Payment in Lieu of Taxes.

PILT is a federal program designed to offset property tax losses in areas with high national public land concentrations. U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley said Grant County received \$700,000 from the program. Merkley said SRS awarded the county \$3 million.

Merkley said he and Wyden have to take "extraordinary means" to keep SRS alive because Oregon is one of the few states that benefit from the program.

Uncertain about EOC laptops, county authorizes purchase of two more

County propane contract likely going out to bid

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County Court voted to buy two new laptops for the airport in case two of the 11 computers the COVID-19 Emergency Operations Center purchased for over \$5,000 are not available to check out.

County Judge Scott Myers, who serves as airport liaison, said he contacted Emergency Manager Paul Gray to see if two laptops were available, and Myers said Gray is checking the inventory.

County Commissioner Sam Palmer, the EOC's former public information officer, said he had a laptop "sitting at his house" and could not remember the password. However, he said, former EOC staff member Seth Klingbile had it.

Palmer said there was nobody to whom to check-in "all of the stuff" from the EOC that he checked out.

Myers asked if there were more items that did not come back. He said, if so, that would be something the county could look into.

Gray did not immediately respond to the Eagle's request for comment. In September, he told the Eagle that the county's computers and communications equipment were accounted for after moving the EOC's office out of the airport.

In September, Gray told the Eagle he hastily moved the EOC out of the airport sooner than expected. He said he received reports that people were letting themselves into the airport terminal after hours and going into offices where the county had stored recently purchased communications equipment.

Gray told the Eagle he wanted Klingbile to go through the supplies with him to see if other departments



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Dan Vandehay with Valley Wide Cooperative speaks during Wednesday's session of Grant County Court.

checked out anything and if anything was missing, but said he did not want to take the chance with the county's investment.

The EOC, which the county court established in March amid the COVID-19 pandemic, came under a barrage of criticism in June when it overspent its \$125,000 budget by almost \$75,000, spending nearly \$92,000 on supply procurements. Without pre-approval from the court, the EOC purchased various items, including at least 11 laptops and six speakerphones for \$900, plus \$90 for two-day shipping.

County likely to open up bidding process for a propane vendor

The court moved to review the contract with its propane provider Ed Staub and is likely to open up a bidding process.

Dan Vandehay with Valley Wide Propane, an Idaho-based cooperative with multiple locations in the Northwest, offered to match Ed Staub's \$1.50 per-gallon price and waive the county's tank rental costs at the

fairgrounds, sheriff's office and road department for the first year of the contract.

Vandehay said tank rental, after the first year, would be \$100 and \$10 for the other locations. He said he could also bundle the three departments but bill them separately.

He said restructuring the account would allow him to do "free work" in the community.

He said free work in the community was not part of the negotiations in acquiring a contract with the county. It is something, he said, Valley Wide does. He said two years ago, at the request of former Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer, Valley Wide performed \$10,000 of work at Lake Creek Youth Camp.

"We didn't charge a thing," he said. "And you didn't see our name in the paper. You didn't see anything like that. It was just something that we do."

County mulls amateur emergency radio system agreement

The court tabled a request until its

next session for a memorandum of understanding that would establish site agreements and contact points for amateur radio repeater sites within the county.

Steve Fletcher, an emergency amateur radio operator, requested the change.

Fletcher said the group identifies locations for radio systems and obtains the required permissions, and creates standards that ensure continuity of operations for radio systems on established sites.

He said the group networks with property owners, emergency radio operators and emergency agencies.

Fletcher said the agreement would establish a local contact point at various sites with an advisory board.

Grant County Sheriff Todd Mckinley said the amateur radio operators and creating an agreement would benefit residents in the county.

He said the agreement would be another "tool" in an emergency.

"They can literally talk across the country wirelessly," he said.



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Haley Walker, Grant County Airport manager, speaks during Wednesday's session of county court.

County signs agreement with department of revenue to collect pot tax

The court signed an agreement with the state department of revenue to collect taxes on retail marijuana sales in the county. Grant County voters said yes to a tax on retail marijuana sales on November.

County Judge Scott Myers said the charge from the department of revenue to collect tax is a small percentage.

Myers said, while the state's marijuana tax has restrictions and guidelines regarding how it spends its pot tax revenue, the county's will not. He said the court would decide how best to utilize the funds.

Myers said the court would have a better idea once they know how much money they collect, but said he does not anticipate the court having a line item in the budget.

"My point of view," he said, "is that we leave it as fluid as it was intended."

Court approves County Fair proposal agreements for 2021

The court approved the agreements for the Grant County Fair to move forward.

The agreements included entertainment, a ticketing company and a sound and lighting provider.

Fairgrounds Manager Mindy Winegar said the fairgrounds would hold an open house from 4-7 p.m. March 30.

In other county news:

- The court appointed Mark Lysne the road advisory committee to a term to expire June 30, 2023.

- The court approved a contract between the county and the state Department of Corrections to house inmates for the state. County Judge Scott Myers said it is valuable contract to have with the state in that it would pay the county \$65 per day, per inmate.



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