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## Oregon's forested communities: Congressmen offer bipartisan solution to fiscal crisis

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By **Guest Columnist**

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Oregon's rural communities cannot afford another 20 years of gridlock in our federal forests. Without a new path forward, mills will continue to disappear, forest jobs will be outsourced, and counties will be pushed off the budgetary cliff.

During a time when it's particularly hard to find common ground in public policy, we think we have achieved a balanced forest health and jobs plan -- in a uniquely Oregon way.

As a bipartisan coalition, we have worked through our differences to forge a plan that would create thousands of new jobs in Oregon's forested communities, ensure the health of federal forests for future generations, and provide long-term funding certainty for Oregon's rural schools, roads, and law enforcement agencies.

Federal support payments to rural and forested communities, commonly known as "county payments," that helped support rural Oregon counties for over a decade expired on Oct. 1.

Absent a long-term solution, diminishing county payments will have serious consequences for Oregon families and businesses. A recent Oregon State University study found that without county payments, Oregon's rural counties will shed between 3,000 and 4,000 jobs. Oregon business sales will drop an estimated \$385 million to \$400 million. And counties will lose \$250 million to \$300 million in revenues.

For counties already near the financial cliff and facing depression-like unemployment, this could be the final blow. In fact, a few counties in our districts may soon call for a public safety emergency and will be forced to eliminate most state-mandated services -- including services that help the neediest citizens in our communities.

This should alarm all Oregonians, even those who do not live in rural communities. Failing counties will have both budgetary and quality of life consequences for the entire state. Vital county services would be severely restricted or altogether disappear. Counties will continue to release offenders and close jail beds. Pot-holed roads and structurally deficient bridges will be neglected. And already underfunded rural schools will be devastated.

Given the serious fiscal crisis our forested communities face, we believe a new approach is necessary to create jobs, help stabilize Oregon's rural communities, and better manage our forests.

We hope to release the full details of our plan early next year. But, given the importance and enormous amount of public interest in this issue, we wanted to update Oregonians on the broad outlines of our work:

Our plan would create an estimated 12,000 new jobs throughout Oregon. In order to preserve and expand Oregon's manufacturing base, our plan would continue the ban on exporting unprocessed logs from federal lands and impose penalties on businesses that violate the law and send family-wage jobs overseas.

Our plan would allow sustainable timber harvest primarily on lands that have been previously harvested. It sets aside sensitive areas and mature and old-growth forests. The timber harvest lands would remain under the ownership of the federal government but be managed by a diverse, public board in trust for the counties and under strict guidelines to ensure sustained yield and to protect and improve clean water and terrestrial and aquatic values. The mature and old-growth forests would be transferred from the Bureau of Land Management to the U.S. Forest Service.

Our plan would provide counties in western Oregon with a predictable level of revenues in perpetuity to support essential county services like law enforcement, health care, education, and transportation. It would reduce counties' dependence on uncertain federal support payments in favor of a long-term solution that allows them to return to the tradition of self-reliance that embodies the best traditions of our state.

Our plan is expected to save taxpayers tens of millions of dollars by reducing the annual federal management costs associated with the management of western Oregon timberlands and making Oregon counties self-sufficient and not dependent upon federal county payments.

Our plan proposes major wilderness and wild and scenic designations to protect some of Oregon's most incredible natural treasures, like the iconic Rogue River.

Our plan is a moderate approach. It will not appease those who insist on returning to the days of unsustainable logging and clear-cutting old growth on public lands.

It will not win the support of those who are content with the status quo -- administrative gridlock and endless legal appeals that have led to unhealthy forests, failing rural counties, and a deteriorating timber industry.

And, like all legislation in Congress, our plan is still subject to the legislative process. While we believe the plan we have crafted is a reasonable compromise that serves the best interests of Oregon, we must work with the House Committee on Natural Resources and our colleagues in the greater U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate and the Obama administration.

Fortunately, the most persuasive arguments are on our side. Our balanced, bipartisan plan would create thousands of jobs in our forests, mills and communities, stabilize rural communities, save taxpayers money, protect old growth and ensure the health of federal forests for future generations.

It's a solution that Oregonians deserve. We look forward to working with those who want to make this long-term vision a reality.

*All three authors are members of the U.S. House of Representatives from Oregon. Walden is a Republican from the 2nd District, in eastern Oregon; DeFazio is a Democrat from the 4th District, in southern Oregon; and Schrader is from the 5th District, in the Willamette Valley, Portland-area suburbs and the central coast.*

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