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Representing the counties, schools and municipalities of the Allegheny National Forest region.

January 16, 2025

The Honorable Glenn Thompson
400 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: Urging Reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) Legislation

Dear Representative Thompson,

We are writing to urgently request your leadership, as Chair of the House Agriculture Committee and longtime advocate for forest management and rural communities, in securing the reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS) and in emphasizing to your colleagues the critical importance of this program for the schools and townships in national forest host communities across the nation and here in Forest County, Pennsylvania.

As you know, SRS provides essential financial assistance to rural counties and school districts that have been impacted by the sharp decline in revenue from timber harvesting on federal lands. For communities like ours, where a significant portion of land is federally owned, and thus not subject to county, school, and municipal property taxes, these funds are a lifeline. They enable these economically challenged communities to maintain vital public services, ensure quality education, foster social fabric and quality of life initiatives, and support infrastructure projects that are essential for our residents and visiting tourists.

The schools in Forest County rely on SRS funding to support academic programs, transportation, and extracurricular activities, all of which are vital for fostering student success. They also allow critical infrastructure maintenance and improvements at our schools to ensure the safety of our students.

Our local governments depend on SRS funds to maintain roads, bridges and other critical infrastructure, ensuring the safety and well-being of our residents and visitors.

Forest County receives a portion of the SRS funds to manage its Fire Wise program through the Forest County Penn State Extension Office.

SRS also provides funds for conservation, recreation and road projects (including township roads) benefiting the Allegheny National Forest through grants approved by the local Resource Advisory Committee.

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Without the reauthorization of the SRS program, our schools and townships face financial shortfalls that will force them to make difficult decisions that will not only significantly impact our students and residents but also hinder economic development in our region.

For example, the Forest Area School District's SRS funding (\$650,000 for FY2023) is about 5% of its annual revenues, which is equivalent to the salaries and benefits for approximately seven teachers. Loss of this funding could mean:

- Teacher furloughs
- Staff furloughs, i.e. custodians and paraprofessionals (academic and behavioral support)
- Delays in replacing the leaking roof at West Forest School, risking building damage and mold/mildew threats to students and staff
- Cutting student field trips and learning experiences beyond the regular classroom, and delaying the purchase of newer curricular materials to meet newly established educational standards in science, career education, FCS and financial literacy

Several of our townships would also be severely impacted if SRS funding is not restored within the next few months. Howe Township's landmass is largely occupied by the Allegheny National Forest, reducing its tax base to the point that 85-90% of their revenues come from SRS funding. When SRS lapsed in 2016, the township's allocation was reduced by approximately two-thirds and resulted in:

- Employees not getting cost of living raises
- Their work week reduced to 32 hours
- One worker being furloughed over the summer months, impacting road maintenance

Jenks Township, with the county's second highest amount of acreage occupied by the Allegheny National Forest, depends on SRS for over 26% of its revenues. Loss of this funding will impact maintenance and improvement projects on township roads that are heavily used by ANF trail visitors as well as residents.

We urge you to work with your colleagues in Congress to ensure the swift passage of Secure Rural Schools reauthorization legislation as a stand-alone bill, within the Farm Bill, or as part of a broader legislation package. Your leadership on this issue is critical and will demonstrate your commitment to the well-being and prosperity of the hundreds of rural national forest host counties across the nation, including here at home in Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. The Allegheny Forest Alliance remains committed to sustaining the stability of the rural communities of the Allegheny National Forest region. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide any further information or assistance.

We appreciate your ongoing dedication to serving your district and advocating for the needs of all rural communities.

Sincerely,

Paul Webster
President, Allegheny Forest Alliance

Cc: Senator Dave McCormick, Senator John Fetterman

Congressman Glenn Thompson (PA-15), RE: SRS Reauthorization, 1/16/2025