

AFSCME supports DeFazio's 'Certainty For Counties' Program

By **KEN ALLEN**
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U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio is right on in his thinking regarding upholding our commitment to rural communities in Oregon and elsewhere that have traditionally been dependent on federal timber receipts to help balance county budgets. Congress — particularly DeFazio's colleagues in the U.S. House — should take heed.

Here in western Oregon most of us are well aware of the history behind the issue. We have counties whose boundaries include upwards of 50 percent federal forestland. If trees aren't being cut — and not many are today, for both economic and environmental reasons — that forestland becomes “dead space” for counties. There is no way to economically diversify federal forestland, and Uncle Sam doesn't pay property taxes. It's a lose-lose situation.

That's why DeFazio's “Certainty For Counties” program is so important. It will provide elected county leaders with sustainable and predictable revenue to support basic county services such as public safety and health. It creates desperately needed new jobs in rural counties at a time when Oregon continues to battle high unemployment. It also establishes a permanent baseline for sustainable timber production while protecting the rights of all landowners involved.

Moreover, it moves rural counties in Oregon (and again, elsewhere in the U.S. with the same problem) away from the uncertainty of the current federal payment program. For the past several years, re-upping the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 — the formal name of the current “timber payments” program — has come down to well past the 11th hour. Counties can't budget and plan for the future. County workers feel the stress of not knowing if their jobs will be there year-to-year. It's a broken system that serves no one well.

Our union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), has long been a strong advocate for solutions to this crisis. We represent the employees in many of the impacted counties. Our national union works this issue tirelessly in Washington, D.C. Our Oregon-based political staff partners with the Association of Oregon Counties to do everything we can here at home.

It's been a long fight. I personally attended a major Portland summit on this issue with President *Clinton* when he was in office, and it seems we're no closer to a permanent solution now than we were then. That's why Rep. DeFazio's plan is so important.

I don't need to itemize every point of the DeFazio program, but as a union leader who advocates for Oregon's working middle class, I do want to stress that this plan prohibits raw log exports and imposes strong penalties on businesses that ship Oregon timber and the accompanying family-wage jobs overseas. That's a key, key provision of this plan. Those family-wage jobs need to stay right here where the trees are grown to protect, preserve and expand Oregon's manufacturing base.

Finally, people nationwide need to understand this is not a handout to counties. It's no one's “fault” that Lane, Josephine, Coos and other counties are covered in trees. Outsiders need to stop blaming such counties for the situation they're in. The DeFazio plan balances economic and environmental concerns in a practical manner, and helps move our vulnerable counties off of financial life support. Please join our organization in supporting this well designed, well thought out federal forestland solution.