

## FELLOWSHIP BRIEF

# A Sustainable Redesign of the Secure Rural Schools Act

Shannon Bell, MEM '22

## The Need.

For over a century, the federal government has been paying counties containing federal forestland. Initially these payments represented a portion of the timber revenue generated on those lands but when timber harvests dramatically decreased towards the end of the 20th century, Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (SRS). Under SRS, county payments were based on the proportion of federal forestland in the county and the county's share of previous revenue-sharing payments. This Act, enacted in 2000, was meant to decrease the dependence counties containing federal forestland had on extractive industries. However, over two decades later county commissioners across the West remain adamant that they would be better served by ramping up timber harvests. Meanwhile, our federal forest ecosystems are on the frontlines of climate change while still experiencing the impacts of past management that prioritized the value of timber and compromised ecosystem services like carbon sequestration and habitat provision. Federal public land management agencies must consider forest values and management options that go beyond extractive use, including compensating counties based on the ecosystem services they provide.



## The Project.

At Oregon Wild, Shannon researched and developed an alternate model to the SRS county payments program that emphasizes and incentivizes conservation. Shannon first consulted the scientific literature, investigating what ecosystem functions are under threat from current forest management practices or climate change. Shannon also conducted interviews with individuals with decades of experience in Western land management, who have strong, well-founded opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of the county payments program. These conversations helped to inspire and shape Shannon's approach to a conservation-focused county payment framework. Shannon documented her approach in a white paper titled, [A Sustainable Redesign of the Secure Rural Schools Act](#). In this paper Shannon described in detail the reasoning behind her recommended reforms, proposed changes to the county payments formula, and the need to incorporate more diverse voices and perspectives in the public land management process.

# The Findings.

In A Sustainable Redesign of the Secure Rural Schools Act, Shannon advocates for reforming the county payment allocation formula to incorporate the value of forest ecosystem health. Shannon used well-developed and commonly used indices including habitat suitability, structural diversity, tree species diversity, carbon sequestration, wildlife diversity, recreation resources availability, and riparian habitat quality indices. These indices are quantifiable, yet represent a broad range of values, including cultural and spiritual values which can be more difficult to measure.

Under the existing SRS formula, eligible counties' shares are determined by both the area of National Forest or select Bureau of Management lands within their borders and their previous revenue-sharing payments. Shannon's proposed revisions would expand this program to cover not only National Forest and certain BLM lands, but all National Park System lands, National Forest System lands, National Conservation Lands, and National Recreation Areas. This change, along with the incorporation of the ESVI in the SRS formula, would help promote more protection of our nation's public lands and more sustainable management of existing federal forests.

# The Impact.

The current payment allocation structure ensures that counties in Oregon, California, and Idaho receive a far greater share of the available SRS funding. A formula that factors in and more heavily weights ecosystem condition and amount of protected land, such as the one presented in Shannon's paper, would focus more on current conservation efforts rather than historical timber dependency. This shift towards rewarding ecologically beneficial land use practices would help reduce underlying inequities in the SRS program and extend the economic benefits of conservation to rural communities throughout the West.

The disproportionate share of federal forestland in the West also means that large-scale shifts towards more sustainable management and increased land protection could have significant impacts in mitigating the impacts of climate change and providing habitat for at-risk species. Furthermore, the design of the formula presented in A Sustainable Redesign of the Secure Rural Schools Act expressly requires the participation of a diverse set of regional community members, non-governmental organization members, industry advocates, and tribal representatives.

## The Student.



Shannon is a Master of Environmental Management candidate at the Yale School of the Environment specializing in environmental policy analysis. She is particularly interested in collaborative policymaking and nature-based climate solutions in the Pacific Northwest, especially in her home state of Oregon. Shannon was inspired to return to the landscape where she was born and raised by both her education in environmental science and climate policy as well as her intimate connection with the diverse forest and highland desert ecosystems. She came to Yale after graduating from the University of British Columbia with a B.S. in Honors Environmental Science.