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Bipartisan congressional group hopes to restore bill providing millions in rural school funding

Democratic and Republican U.S. legislators from Western states are joining forces to get the 20-years-old Secure Rural Schools bill reauthorized

BY: **ALEX BAUMHARDT** - FEBRUARY 21, 2025 6:00 AM





📷 Chiloquin Elementary School is part of the Klamath County School District in southern Oregon and relies on federal funding from the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act. In December, U.S. House Republicans failed to renew the bill for the first time in 24 years. (Alex Baumhardt/Oregon Capital Chronicle)

A bipartisan group of lawmakers from the West are joining forces to persuade Congress to reauthorize a 24-year-old bill that has sent billions to states including Oregon for critical public services and schools.

Oregon's U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, both Democrats, and two Idaho Republicans – U.S. Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch – announced Feb. 4 that they are reintroducing the [Secure Rural Schools Act](#) that was left to die without a vote by U.S. House Republicans last December.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers from the U.S. House of

Representatives, including U.S. Rep. Val Hoyle, a Democrat representing Oregon's 4th District, and Rep. Cliff Bentz, a Republican representing Oregon's 2nd District, also reintroduced the act in the U.S. House on Feb. 14. There is currently no hearing on the bill scheduled in the House or Senate, but if passed, it would restore millions in funding – including about \$80 million for Oregon – through 2026.

Glen Szymoniak, superintendent of the Klamath County School District in southern Oregon, which has received the most funding from the act among the state's school districts, said the money is crucial. The district has, in recent years, gotten between \$800,000 and \$1 million each year.

“Having that money each year is a big deal us,” he said. “When you can't pass a bond, having a million dollars to fix roofs or something like that is a big deal.”

In November, the Senate reauthorized the act, which first passed in 2000. But during the December run-up to passage of a [stop-gap spending bill](#) to keep the government open until March, House Republicans could not reach agreement about how the bill should be funded and so it [died without a vote](#), according to Wyden spokesman Hank Stern. Wyden co-authored the original bill in 2000.

“I'm glad this bill is being reintroduced right at the start of this new Congress in this bipartisan spirit, and I strongly urge our House colleagues to act with the same

urgency and bipartisan ethic to reconnect this proven lifeline ASAP for rural communities in Oregon and nationwide,” Wyden said in a news release.

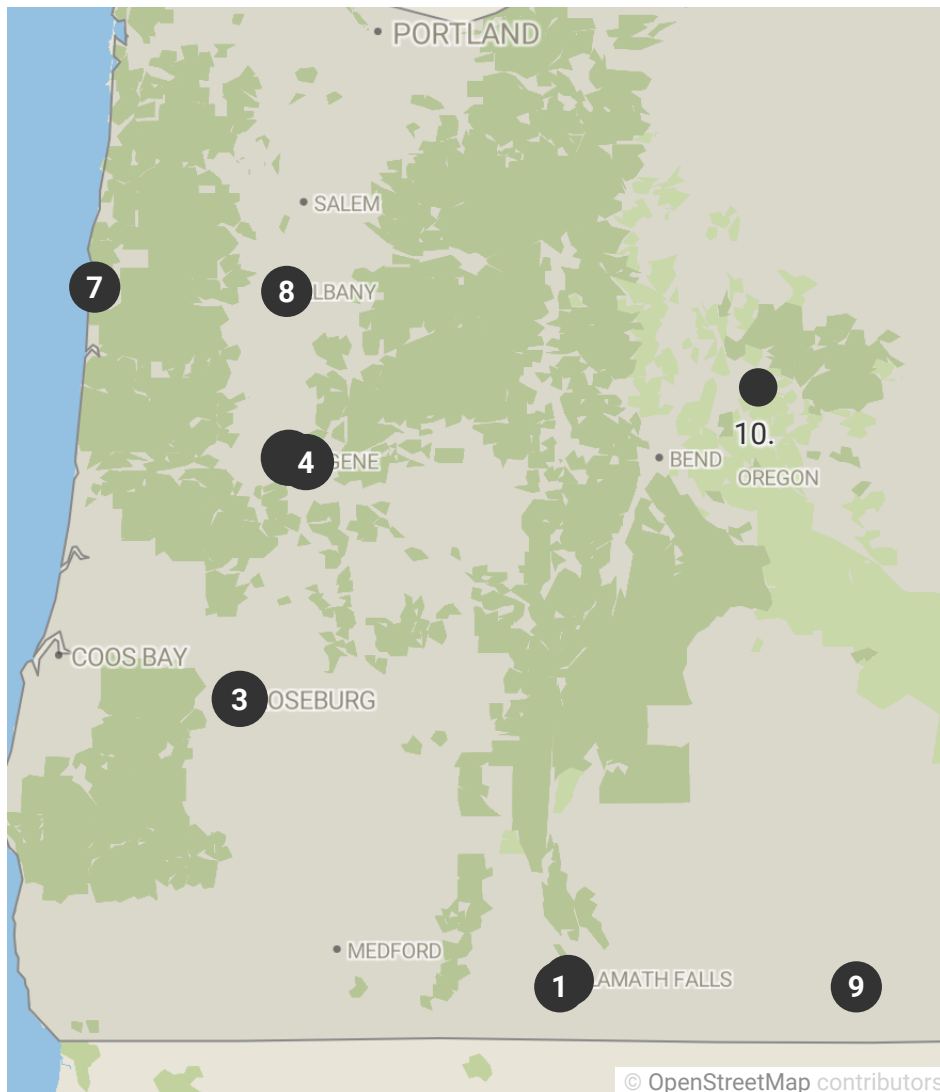
The Secure Rural Schools Act has distributed billions in funding for schools, roads and other public services and infrastructure to counties in Oregon, 40 other states and Puerto Rico.

The money is designated to counties that have federal land within their borders. Because those counties provide critical services to people and industries using those lands for activities that generate revenue for the federal government – such as animal grazing and timber production – the federal government sends money back to those counties to help them pay for critical services and to weather other changes.

In the West, the money has largely helped keep county and school budgets whole following reduced logging and a reduction in timber revenue from federal forests in the 1990s to save imperiled species. In Oregon, the bulk of funding goes to school districts in and around the Willamette National Forest, which took the biggest financial hit when harvest levels on the heavily logged forest were reduced nearly 80%.

Top 10 Oregon school districts receiving the most Secure Rural Schools Act funding 2004 to 2024





Map: Alex Baumhardt / Oregon Capital Chronicle • Source: Oregon Department of Education • [Embed](#) • [Download image](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Oregon has received \$4 billion in funding from the bill in the last 24 years, and in 2024, 30 counties got nearly \$74 million. Early payments to counties under the act equaled the average amount they received from timber harvests from the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management in the top three timber-producing years of the 1980s. It's declined by more than half in recent years due to reshifting of funds across eligible states and because it was meant to be transitional,

according to Stern.

Oregon schools have received more than \$368 million from the act since 2004, and an average of \$9.7 million each year, according to Oregon Department of Education data. Oregon traditionally counted the Secure Rural Schools payments as local revenues for the sake of the statewide school funding equalization formula, so 165 of the state's 197 school districts ended up seeing some money from the act, including the two biggest, Portland Public Schools and the Salem-Keizer School District, despite having little to no federal forest land within their boundaries.

This changed in 2023, when Oregon made updates to the distribution model and stopped counting Secure Rural Schools funding as local revenue. The Oregon Department of Education in 2024 agreed to back-pay districts like Klamath County School District that should have received more direct funding from the Secure Rural Schools Act since 2018.

The agency has until Oct. 1 to make up for millions of dollars in underpayments to 82 school districts, including Klamath County School District, which is owed more than \$2.5 million.

Despite these issues with funding distribution, districts in Eugene, Douglas County and Roseburg, Springfield and Albany were among the top recipients of funding in the last two decades. And districts near the Klamath National Forest, such as Klamath County School

District, have ultimately received greater payments than most other districts in the last two decades.

Szymoniak, the superintendent in Klamath County, said it is the only money the district gets from the federal government that can be broadly used for any needs they have.

“Other federal money, like Title I and Title IX, they all have strings attached, and they have really strict allowances for how you spend it. With state school funding, I always consider that that’s got to go to kids and teachers and to providing education,” he explained. “Secure Rural Schools money, because there's no strings attached, that's where I go to buy buses, to get equipment for maintenance for the school. That's where we can build efficiencies and invest in the future.”

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