

Counties win in farm bill conference report

House and Senate negotiators took a major step toward helping counties and their residents by finalizing an agreement on a five-year farm bill Jan. 27. The bipartisan conference report contains several provisions championed by NACo, including extending the Payment In Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program in FY 2014, reauthorizing county priorities within the Rural Development title, and protecting county authority over forest roads. Final passage of the farm bill is expected by the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate within the next few days.

PILT payments allow local governments, including 1,850 counties in 49 states, to provide critical government services for residents such as education, solid waste disposal, law enforcement, search and rescue, health care, environmental compliance, firefighting and parks and recreation.

In addition, the conference report includes several NACo priorities on a broad range of programs that assist counties in the development of rural water-wastewater infrastructure, community facilities, broadband expansion, nutrition assistance, renewable energy, local and regional food systems, support for new farmers and business development initiatives.

"The farm bill as it stands tonight is a major win for the nation's counties and the residents we serve," said NACo President Linda Langston, supervisor, Linn County, Iowa. "It cannot be overstated how important 2014 PILT program funding and reauthorization of county-supported rural development programs are to local economies as we work to emerge from years of recession and slow economic growth."

Mike Murray, commissioner, Lewis and Clark County, Mont. and chair of NACo's Public Lands Steering Committee, said the inclusion of mandatory funding for the PILT program provides a great deal of relief to public lands counties nationwide.

"We are most pleased that the federal government will once again renew its obligation to America's counties which are unable to collect property taxes from the nation's 606 million-acre estate, yet are responsible to provide services on these lands," Murray said.

Bob Fox, commissioner, Renville County, Minn. and chair of NACo's Agriculture and Rural Affairs Steering Committee, said he is pleased to see a strong emphasis on rural development in the farm bill conference report.

"The regional language and mandatory funding within the Rural Development title will allow our nation's rural counties to address pressing infrastructure needs and strengthening our local communities. This has been a top priority for NACo," Fox said.

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- The Payment In Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program is extended as a fully funded, mandatory entitlement program at \$425 million. PILT has retained full mandatory funding since FY 2008, with funding levels of \$393 million FY2012 and \$401 million (after sequestration) in FY 2013.
- The Rural Development title receives \$228 million in mandatory funding including:
 - \$150 million for Water and Waste Water Program
 - \$63 million for the Value-Added Producer Grant Program
 - \$15 million for the Rural Microenterprise Assistance Program (RMAP)
 - \$100 million for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program
- The conference report includes regional language championed by NACo in the Rural Development title allowing the U.S. Department of Agriculture to prioritize 10 percent of funds towards regional, multi-jurisdictional projects
- The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) is cut by \$8 billion over 10 years. The Senate farm bill (S.954) proposed \$4.5 billion in cuts over 10 years; the House farm bill (H.R.2642) proposed \$40 billion in cuts over 10 years
- The conference report preserves U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's long-standing policy regulating stormwater runoff from forest and logging roads under the states' Best Management Practices (BMPs), rather than through the Clean Water Act's (CWA) industrial stormwater permit program, which has tighter and more restrictive requirements than general CWA stormwater permits. This is a huge win for counties who own and manage 44 percent of the nation's roads and highways. A number of county-owned roads run through federal, state and private lands. Many of these roads are multipurpose and not solely dedicated to logging—and are used by residents, recreators, emergency responders and wildfire teams.

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The farm bill is a massive and complex legislative package that touches on many aspects of county government services, from infrastructure to beginning farmer programs to renewable energy," Chase said. "NACo applauds the bipartisan leadership of the House and Senate for finishing this important bill. This bill provides invaluable resources used by our nation's counties to provide essential services to our local citizens and businesses." NACo's executive director, thanked House and Senate leaders and members for working in a bipartisan manner to move a multi-year farm bill forward