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Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Secure  
Rural Schools (SRS) and Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT)

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Thank you Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and members of the Committee for inviting me here today. I am very pleased to be here today to discuss Secure Rural Schools (SRS) and Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) programs.

I am a former self-employed licensed land surveyor, a former Pocahontas County Board of Education member and now a teacher of science at Pocahontas County High School. I have a Bachelor of Science in civil engineering from West Virginia University and an Associates degree in land surveying from Glenville State College. My family has lived in Pocahontas County for over 150 years, and I continue to operate our family farm.

I served on the board of education starting in 2018 until July of 2019 when I resigned to teach. During my time on the board, I knew early on that we were at risk of losing our SRS payments. Knowing that this would be an enormous loss of funds to our county school system, I began to research SRS and the U.S. Forest Service land within our county. We received our final SRS payment for the school system in the spring of 2019 of around \$360,000 (another \$360,000 by statute goes to funding the County's roads program). In a county where our school budget is relatively small, the loss of these funds means cutting vital programs and staff.

## County Demographics and Forest Service Lands

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Pocahontas County has a population of approximately 8,400 people with a land area of 940.28<sup>1</sup> square miles or 601,780 acres, the third largest in West Virginia after Randolph and Greenbrier respectively. This gives Pocahontas County a population density of 8.9 people per square mile as of the 2018 estimated census data, the lowest population density of any county in West Virginia.

Of the 601,780 acres that make up Pocahontas County, about 310,000 acres of it lies within Monongahela National Forest (MNF)<sup>2</sup>. This is land that is not available for development and

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<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau. (2019, 11 16). *United States Census Bureau*. Retrieved from Quick Facts: <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/pocahontascountywestvirginia,US/POP060210>

<sup>2</sup> Pocahontas County . (2019, 11 16). *Quick Facts*. Retrieved from Pocahontas County Convention & Visitors Bureau: [https://www.pocahontascountywv.com/quick\\_county\\_facts.aspx](https://www.pocahontascountywv.com/quick_county_facts.aspx)

normal taxation. Interestingly, while researching courthouse records of land held by the U.S. Forest Service, I discovered that MNF actually controls closer to 425,000 acres in Pocahontas County instead of the said 310,000 acres claimed. So approximately two thirds of the land in our county is federally owned. (See Appendix 1 for a map of Pocahontas County with the MNF highlighted)

Pocahontas County relies on tourism, agriculture, and timber harvesting as our principal sources of income<sup>3</sup>. As an isolated, mountainous county, revenues in every area of our economy are low as we strain to provide infrastructure and services to our citizens. We also look after approximately 1 million visitors annually and provide assistance to the Monongahela National Forest employees and their families with services such as childhood education.

### Noted Achievements on a Limited Budget

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As of April 01, 2019 Pocahontas County has an enrollment of 991 students. We operate one high school, one K-8 elementary/middle school, two K-5 elementary schools, and one 6-8 middle school. Working with a limited budget from the state, and previous SRS payments, very careful decisions must be made about every dollar spent. Even with our financial shortcomings, Pocahontas is still able to achieve high standards, but the loss of SRS funding puts some of these achievements at risk.

#### 1. Green Bank Elementary/Middle School

Green Bank Elementary/Middle School (GBEMS) is a K-8 school located in the northern end of the county beside the Green Bank Observatory (GBO). Last year GBEMS formed their first Lego Robotics team. With the help of a couple GBO volunteers, they won the regional competition and went on to the world competition held in Detroit, Michigan.

#### 2. Pocahontas County High School

Pocahontas County High School (PCHS) is located near the middle of the county and is a 9-12 grade school. The high school is blessed to not only have a high achieving academic school, but also one of the top vocational programs in the state. Along with the standard math, science, social studies, and English classes, PCHS is also able to provide students with classes such as forestry, agriculture, carpentry, welding, culinary, computer science, engineering, and business. PCHS also offers classes such as art, band, and Spanish. With all of these classes, PCHS is not only graduating college-ready students but also workforce-ready students. With the loss of

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<sup>3</sup> WorkForce West Virginia. (2019, 11 16). *Labor Market Information*. Retrieved from WorkForce West Virginia: <http://lmi.workforcewv.org/default.html>

funds, these programs have to continuously, fundraise and try to find other means of finance to keep some of their programs alive.

Some other achievements include:

- In 2018-2019 PCHS graduated a National Merit Finalist.
- In 2018 the PCHS Forestry Team won 1<sup>st</sup> in the Nation at the National FFA competition. This gave PCHS Forestry its 8<sup>th</sup> national championship and its 26<sup>th</sup> state championship. PCHS has also had 20 number one individuals and the only school in history to take 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> at nationals.
- In 2015 PCHS also had a student place second in the Nation in carpentry.

### 3. Pocahontas County Education System

Pocahontas County school system has many achievements that it is proud of, but one of the most recent achievements is the advancements of our math and STEAM programs. A few years ago Pocahontas County's math program was around state average. With the help of a few teachers and some innovative minds, they were able to redesign how to teach mathematics and take a rural county to one of the top performers in that field. Pocahontas County has partnered with National Science Foundation's Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship program, West Virginia University's College of Education and Human Services, the West Virginia Department of Education and the American Institutes for Research to create Mountaineer Mathematics Master Teachers or M3T program<sup>4</sup>. This program is designed to spread thoughts, ideas, and teaching methods throughout the state to other interested counties and teachers. Many other counties have sent their math departments to observe Pocahontas County math teachers, which Pocahontas County welcomes, in order to help advance students' educations.

One of the leaders in the M3T project, Joanna Burt-Kinderman was also featured in *Education Week*, "Leaders to Learn From", in 2019.

### Needs of Pocahontas County School System

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Like many small rural school systems around West Virginia, Pocahontas County is always searching for money. It has become necessary for our board to hire a grant writer to assist with looking and signing up for grants that could help to improve not only our school facilities but also fill any gaps that could be missing in our school system. We try to be as frugal as possible with all the funds we receive, but with the added pressures of state and federal requirements and the needs of our children, it is hard to keep on staff that is not 100% necessary. The only way Pocahontas County Schools was able to balance their budget for the 2019-2020 school year, with

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<sup>4</sup> West Virginia University. (2019, 11 16). *M3T Frequently Asked Questions*. Retrieved from West Virginia University: <https://stemcenter.wvu.edu/faq/m3t-faq>

the loss of SRS funding, was the retirement of several teachers and staff members. Unfortunately, some of those positions are the ones that are badly needed. Green Bank Elementary/Middle School lost three (3) positions, Marlinton Elementary School lost 1.5 positions, and Hillsboro Elementary School lost 0.5 positions. Principals are teaching classes each day. One of our teachers has assignments at two schools which are 26 miles apart.

In our service personnel – cooks, custodians, maintenance, etc. – we are at the state minimum of what is required. These personnel work tireless hours and do the best they can to keep our children fed and our schools clean and operating.

Pocahontas County Schools must deal with special issues that are unique to rural counties with few schools and small populations. Due to the vast size of our county, transportation is one of the biggest expenses that our county incurs. Reaching every student in our far-flung county involves bus routes of many miles and all ages of children riding on the same bus.

Like many other counties in West Virginia, we struggle with our own drugs, alcohol, and opioid problems. Many students live with their grandparents, who do not receive any financial assistance for housing their grandchildren. This puts a large financial burden on families that may already be struggling. Due to the opioid issues and other family and social dynamics, our school systems have a greater need for well qualified school counselors and psychologists. We need qualified people who can assist in these mental and emotional situations. We also are now in need of health and nursing specialists who can provide health care to those students who may not be able to receive medical attention anywhere else. Pocahontas County is fortunate to have a nurse on staff and also a Community Care facility. However, those services are only in each school one day a week. If there was a medical emergency with a student, the correct services or personnel may not be there on that day.

Most of our school facilities are beginning to show their age. Our high school alone will be fifty (50) years old this coming year. Even our newest facility is almost 30 years old. Our schools are beginning to deteriorate and so are many of the utilities, technology, kitchen equipment, etc. that our schools depend on. Out of the five schools that we operate, only the high school has air condition in its classrooms.

In Pocahontas County we try as best as we are able to implement security measures but, in reality, we are still lacking. Being in a rural area makes it harder for police and emergency services to quickly get to a school. Our small police force lacks the resources to spare policeman at each of the schools. If, we had the funds it would be ideal to have a resource officer at each of the schools. Also, being in our rural location and the radio quiet zone for the GBO, cell phone service is severely limited. Only two out the five schools have cell service and only one is adequate and reliable. This makes emergency communication very difficult even within our schools from classroom to classroom. The high school has an internal phone system connecting all of the classrooms while the other schools do not. They must rely on email or just word of

mouth to relay information. Due to our limited broadband and technology, students as well as teachers do not have access to Wi-Fi. This also limits our emergency communication.

Finally, as much as we enjoy the academic accomplishments our students have achieved, the truth is, the lack of reliable internet accessibility at schools and in the community constrains our progress. When our students are taking required tests at the high school they often can only do a few at a time and sometimes get “bumped off” the Internet in the middle of a testing session.

## Adverse Effects of Funding Loss

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The reason for listing some of the achievements that the Pocahontas County school system has is to illustrate what is at risk. As of right now, we are still able to provide students with many different learning opportunities and the education for several different career paths. As funds diminish, these are some of the programs that could go by the wayside. Without the arts, the vocational studies, and other STEAM courses, students will have even less of an opportunity to further their education and could also become less competitive in the job and college markets. With the loss of these curriculums, student dropout rates would increase. Some students only attend school because they have a chance to learn a trade and to be career ready right out of high school. With a rise in dropout rates and less children attending school, there is a chance that other misfortunes such as poverty and drugs could rise.

From a community standpoint, a drop in the level of education provided could have a substantial effect on the county as a whole. Many employers and companies take into account the school system in an area when selecting a location to start a business. Also, with telecommuting becoming more prevalent, people now have a larger say on where they would like to live and work from. This also puts education in the forefront when some families are looking for a place to reside.

Pocahontas County’s population has decreased over the last ten (10) years and one possible way to reverse this trend is to educate our youth. By providing our children with the best education possible, some may find ways to grow a business in their community, make a new start up, or bring something back to the area that they have found while furthering their education. The only way to initiate this process is by instilling in them the urge to learn, to advance themselves and their minds and never stop learning. If you do not have a successful school system with qualified and certified teachers, you are at risk of losing your youth.

## Solutions

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For the time being, until a more permanent solution has been found, we are asking that Congress reinstate or extend the previous SRS bill for another two (2) years. This would continue to aid in schools funds while a more secure plan develops.

In those two (2) years, a new and stable plan needs to be set into action. Schools want a permanent fix where they don't have the fear every year of losing resources. Having a stable, predictable source of income also allows counties to better plan for the future which gives more security to a school system.

I have read over Senator Crapo's proposed bill to extend the SRS funds and hope that this moves forward. I have also briefly read over Senator Wyden's bill and would appreciate a summary or layout of what this could do for the SRS counties.

## Conclusion

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In my testimony I have focused on Pocahontas County because that is what I am most familiar with. But, I am here to represent all of the counties in West Virginia that receive SRS funds. Certain counties have indicated that they have some of the same needs that Pocahontas has. Hardy County, for example, sent a letter to Senator Manchin indicating their financial assistance will decrease 88 percent without SRS being reauthorized. As stated, the SRS program's expiring is a huge loss to the Pocahontas County school system's budget and funds and could have detrimental effects on the county as a whole. I urge you today to heed our concerns and enact a bill that will give a stable and permanent solution to the SRS.

Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and members of the Committee, thank you again for inviting me here today. It has been an honor and a privilege. Our county school systems are happy to partner with you in trying to find a solution that supports all SRS counties. I am happy to answer any further questions to the best of my ability and help to continue this discussion.

Justin M. Dilley  
Teacher of Science, Pocahontas County Board of Education

Appendix 1: Map of United States Forest Service Land in Pocahontas County

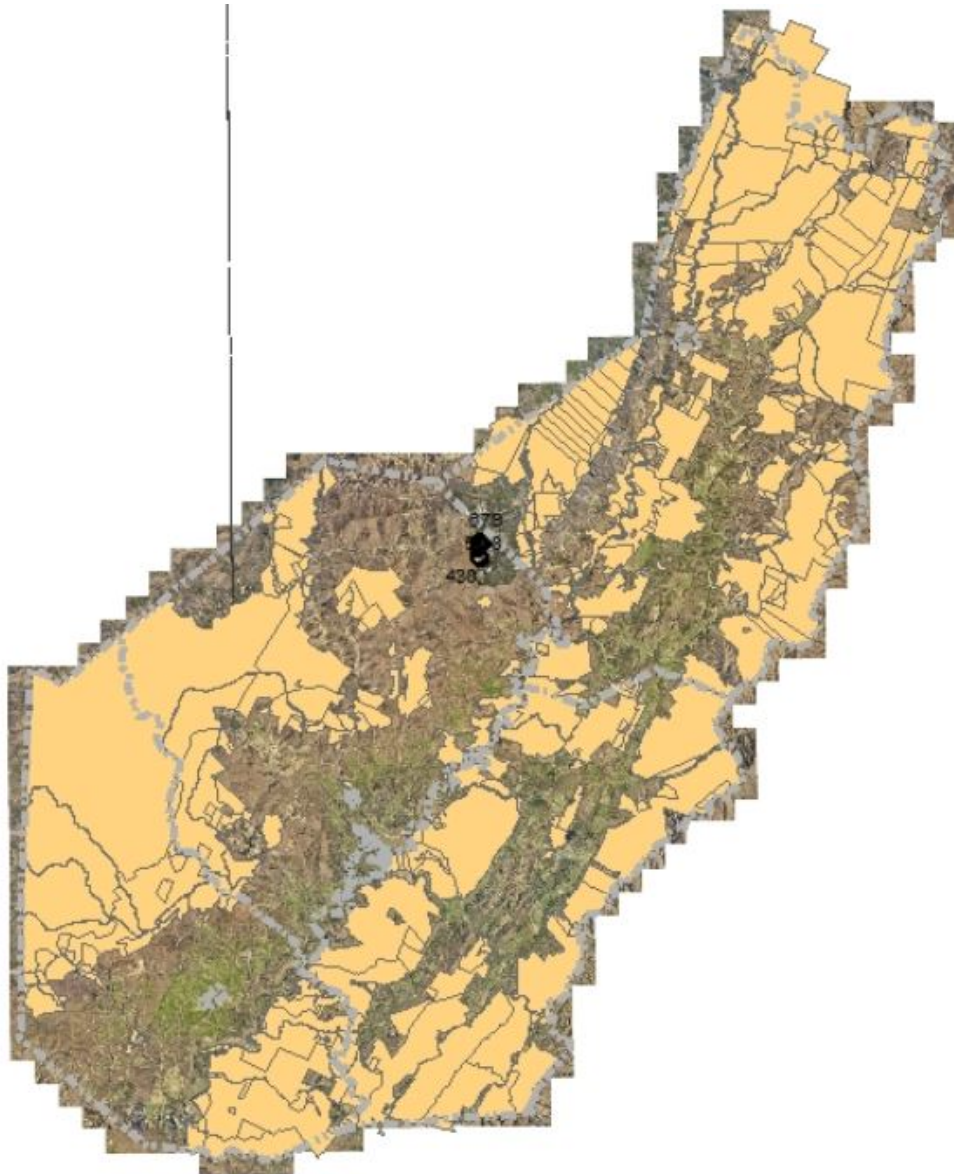


Figure 1: Yellow is USFS owned land in Pocahontas County, West Virginia