

PUBLIC LANDS

Bill would reauthorize rural payments program

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A bipartisan group of Western senators wants to reauthorize for 10 years a program many rural communities rely on to pay for law enforcement, road maintenance and other critical services.

The [legislation](#) would extend the payment in lieu of taxes program (PILT), which expires on Sept. 30, through fiscal 2029.

"Congress and the federal government have a moral responsibility to provide stable and reliable funding for this important program," said Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), one of the bill's sponsors. "Rural counties in Oregon and across America deserve certainty. It's time to end the financial roller coaster they face each year."

PILT requires the federal government to pay localities that have public lands within their boundaries to offset financial losses. Those communities cannot tax public lands within their jurisdictions, which means they're losing an important source of revenue.

Federal money for each locality depends on a formula that incorporates various factors, including a community's population and eligible acres of land. Jurisdictions use the funds for services such as law enforcement, emergency operations and road maintenance.

"Without PILT funding, many rural communities throughout our state and much of the West would face economic devastation," said Idaho Republican Sen. Jim Risch, who is also sponsoring the bipartisan bill. "Our rural communities need a lasting solution, and we owe it to them to fulfill our obligation and reauthorize PILT."

PILT is often viewed as assistance that only goes to Western states where the government owns much of the land. In fact, Interior makes such payments to more than 1,850 counties in 49 states, the District of Columbia and American territories.

Congress appropriated \$500 million for PILT in fiscal 2019. The House Interior spending bill would level-fund the program at \$500 million in fiscal 2020.

Organizations like the National Association of Counties would like Congress to eventually establish full mandatory funding for PILT to avoid subjecting the program to the uncertainty of the annual appropriations process.

The other senators sponsoring the legislation to reauthorize PILT through fiscal 2029 are: Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), Mike Crapo (R-Idaho), Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) and Cory Gardner (R-Colo.).

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