

CHAPTER 3

A VIEW FROM THE GROUND: CASE STUDIES IN IMPLEMENTATION

This assessment presents findings based, in part, on 16 case studies of rural counties or Alaskan cities that receive payments associated with the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act (P.L. 106-393). The case studies cover 9 states and include analysis of Title III programs in 46 counties and the Alaskan cities of Wrangell and Petersburg associated with federal forestlands, as well as 15 Resource Advisory Committees (RACs) for which those counties and Alaskan cities have allocated Title II funds (Pennsylvania has no RACs). The case studies, listed by state, are:

Alaska

- Wrangell-Petersburg Forest Service RAC

Arizona

- Eastern Arizona Counties Forest Service RAC

California

- Del Norte County Forest Service RAC
- Siskiyou County Forest Service RAC
- Tuolumne County Forest Service RAC

Idaho

- Idaho Panhandle Forest Service RAC
- Southwest Idaho Forest Service RAC

Mississippi

- Southwest Mississippi Forest Service RAC

Montana

- Lincoln County Forest Service RAC

Oregon

- Coos Bay BLM RAC
- Fremont-Winema Forest Service RAC
- Medford BLM RAC
- Roseburg District BLM RAC

Pennsylvania

- Elk County; Forest County; McKean County; and Warren County Title III programs (Allegheny National Forest)

Washington

- Colville Forest Service RAC
- Olympic Peninsula Forest Service RAC

Cases were chosen for their geographic diversity and complexity, the range of implementation practices they illustrate, the ecological and collaborative outcomes they represent, and the variety of issues and lessons they elucidate. The selected counties and Alaskan cities represent a variety of examples for the allocation of Title II and Title III funds. RACs advising both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management are included. Some RACs include multiple counties, and some are single-county RACs. Some receive very large federal payments and some receive relatively small payments. Some RACs build on experience with prior collaborative efforts, and some represent first efforts at agency-interest group collaboration. Together, these local examples illustrate a diversity of challenges that forest-dependent communities face, and the powerful outcomes of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act in action.

The forest-dependent counties and Alaskan cities represented in this study have historically relied heavily upon timber and other extractive industries including mining and commercial fishing as their primary economic activities. Given the vulnerability of these industries to fluctuations in national and international markets, these rural areas have suffered severe economic downturn with the decline of timber harvests on federal forestlands and declines in the domestic timber industry. In the eastern cases of Pennsylvania and Mississippi, small, but significant portions of the counties are federally owned. In Mississippi, the overwhelming majority of forestland is in private, non-industrial ownership. This is in contrast to the western counties, where in some cases up to two-thirds or more of the county is in public ownership.

While timber harvests peaked in the mid to late 1980s on many national forests in the West, beginning as early as the 1970s, national recessions, changes in the export markets for forest products, competition from mills in the South and imports from Canada, corporate buyouts and consolidations, and increased mechanization coalesced to strain the timber industry. Large companies turned elsewhere to look for profits, and many smaller, family owned companies found themselves forced out of business altogether. In the 1990s, timber harvests on federal forests plummeted with the setting aside of reserve and wilderness areas, reduced availability of large diameter timber due to prior harvesting practices, and the stipulations of state and federal legislation regarding clean water and endangered species protection. National forest management plans faced legal challenges reflecting a growing interest on the part of the general public in protecting a broader diversity of ecological and conservation values.¹ Catastrophic wildfires, such as the 500,000-acre Rodeo Chediski wildfire in Arizona, have exacerbated the drastic reduction in timberlands on national forests.² Reduced access to timber on state and federal lands contributed further to an already declining and increasingly concentrated timber industry. This matrix of pressures affected not only timber companies, but secondary and tertiary industries such as mills and other forest product processing plants and transport companies to reduce or close down operations, laying off thousands of workers across the West.

These reductions in timber harvests have rendered forest-dependent counties vulnerable to significant economic decline and the social dislocation that accompanies it. The counties and

¹ Southwest Mississippi provides an interesting counter example, where timber harvests on the national forest remained high up through 2000, and legal challenges based on habitat concerns are a recent development.

² In some cases, the threat of catastrophic wildfire has inspired recent innovative efforts for small-diameter thinning and economic enterprise.

Alaskan cities represented in these case studies have unemployment and poverty rates³ that exceed their statewide averages, and median income levels that fall significantly below their statewide averages. Many of these counties have been identified by their state governments as being economically “distressed.” With the loss of family-wage jobs, sectors of rural communities are seeing deepening poverty, dwindling populations, and declining school enrollments.

Some counties, or portions of counties, are faring better, particularly those with growing urban areas or appealing natural destinations where production economies are shifting toward amenity economies. Counties that contain or are near urban areas are seeing population increases, with growth in residential and second home construction, and in some cases are attracting new employers such as corporate headquarters or call centers. Service sector jobs are growing in these areas, though many of these do not provide a living wage for families, and are not providing jobs to workers displaced from the timber sector. Despite economic growth, the population of those living and working below the poverty line persists. These pockets of growth often reflect the changing face of forested counties – a growing number of retirees and professionals in the new information and technology sectors bringing transferred wealth and a sensibility about natural resources that tends to focus more on conservation values than on production. In addition, in a number of areas, immigrant populations are increasing, primarily from Spanish-speaking countries, working in construction, landscape, and service sector jobs. While unemployment and poverty rates remain high on Native American lands, a number of tribes have become important leaders of economic enterprise, and in some counties, are among the largest employers providing jobs in natural resource management, clinics, hotels and casinos, cranberry production and transport, and tribal government.

Finally, the cases included in this assessment reflect a range of experiential contexts in which Resource Advisory Committees operate. In a number of areas in the West, where conflict and legal battles have accompanied economic decline and changing resource management values precipitated by legal or federal agency requirements, there are many examples of efforts to build bridges between contending interests toward collaborative resource management. Watershed councils, intertribal fisheries commissions, federal advisory committees on the Northwest Forest Plan, and county partnerships for environmentally sustainable economic development have brought together diverse, and previously antagonistic, interests to explore collaborative solutions to complex environmental and economic issues. In our 16 cases, we find that prior experience with these collaborative efforts is one of the factors that helps RACs succeed. In some cases, as in southwest Mississippi, the RAC represents a first effort of its kind, and agency staff have invested significant time in outreach to build buy-in for the process. In Pennsylvania, where conflicts rage over how the hardwood forest should be managed, counties felt that the RAC process presented too much risk to already tenuous, and at times, volatile interest group relationships. Pennsylvania has invested all of its funds into Title III programs.

While the analysis and lessons for this assessment are drawn from all 16 case studies, we have chosen to present the following five case studies of Resource Advisory Committees and associated county Title III programs in full:

- Olympic Peninsula Forest Service RAC (Washington),
- Idaho Panhandle Forest Service RAC
- Southwest Mississippi Forest Service RAC
- Siskiyou County Forest Service RAC (California)

³ An exception is Tuolumne County, in California, where the county poverty rate is lower than the statewide average, but pockets of poverty persist.

- Roseburg District BLM RAC (Oregon)

The five case studies represent a spectrum of the approaches that rural communities across the nation have adopted in implementing Title II and Title III of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act. They, together with the report that follows, synthesizing lessons from all 16 case studies, highlight some of the achievements and successes of the program, while identifying some problematic issues in which resolution would enhance the importance of the legislation in the event of its reauthorization.