

Allegheny National Forest Pennsylvania Case Study of Implementation of P.L.106-393

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Introduction

This study of the implementation of Public Law 106-393, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act, in the four counties surrounding the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania is part of a larger, nationwide study of the Act. Since the early twentieth century, states and communities throughout the U.S. have received funds through the sharing of receipts from revenue producing activities on the Forest Service's national forests and the Bureau of Land Management administered Oregon and California (O&C) lands. In 2000, following many years of declining timber harvests—the primary revenue producer on much of this land—Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act to restore and stabilize county revenue payments from both national forests and O&C lands. The legislation was also to replace the “safety net” county payments in the area of the Northwest Forest Plan.

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act is novel legislation for two reasons: it standardizes roads and schools payments for six years; and, perhaps most unique, it pays for something other than roads and schools (for which virtually all of the previous “receipt payments” were used) through potentially innovative mechanisms. The legislation combines the creation of employment opportunities and maintenance of existing infrastructure with the enhancement and restoration of forest ecosystems and watersheds. The legislation also provides mechanisms and money for strengthening cooperative relationships between federal resource management agencies and the local people that use and care for the land. Direct local involvement is achieved under Title II of the Act through the establishment of Resource Advisory Committees (RACs) composed of local stakeholders with a mandate to recommend projects. Under Title III in the legislation, elected county officials identify and fund projects.

The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act calls for monitoring and evaluation of Title II funds. The unique aspects of this legislation offer important learning opportunities—but only if systematic monitoring and assessment efforts are undertaken. Whether it represents a model for the future or not, implementation of the legislation and of both Title II and III projects needs to be assessed to determine if funded projects are innovative, achieve desired outcomes, and are genuinely successful.

With support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Forest Service, and the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, the Sierra Institute for Community and Environment (formerly Forest Community Research) is evaluating Title II and Title III of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act. The Sierra Institute is evaluating the legislation by examining Title II and III projects and their outcomes in 16 cases across the country. In addition to examining specific project outcomes, the Sierra Institute is examining the process by which counties decide to allocate their funds under P.L.106-393 between Title III projects and the RAC; evaluating the institutional mechanisms established to implement P.L.106-393; and assessing if and under what conditions stakeholder collaboration, as structured by the RAC process, leads to innovative approaches that satisfy both social and resource management objectives. A fundamental research issue is understanding how effective these mechanisms are for implementing P.L.106-393, and how they might be improved. This assessment will provide information that can enhance the effectiveness of the ongoing implementation of Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination legislation and will contribute to the discussion about its reauthorization. Results of this assessment may also be used to inform broader policy discussions

concerning community-based natural resource management approaches, such as the National Fire Plan.

Pennsylvania is an important case study for the objectives of this project. The Allegheny National Forest is different from the national forests of the Western United States where counties have generally been enthusiastic about forming RACs. For the most part, the Allegheny is a hardwood forest that regenerated from an Eastern coniferous forest following logging, land clearance, and industrial development during the early years of the twentieth century. The Allegheny is one component in a matrix of federal, state, and private forestland, all of which are sources of timber for a changing forest products industry. The Allegheny extends across four counties, Elk, McKean, Forest, and Warren, each of which has a different degree of dependence on the timber industry. Over the last decade, the Allegheny has been the site of intense controversy between highly polarized interests over the future of forest management, reminiscent of the 1980s and 1990s conflicts in the forests of the Pacific Northwest.

In 2001, only Forest County took advantage of the opportunity to secure stable payments for education and roads under Title I of P.L.106-393. Elk, McKean, and Warren counties followed suit in 2003. To date, however, none of the counties

has decided to allocate any funds to a RAC under Title II. This case study, then, differs from others in that it does not analyze the impacts of stakeholder involvement on forest management through the lens of a RAC and the projects it has approved. It is focused, instead, on the arguments articulated by different actors for and against inviting the public and diverse stakeholders to become involved in management of the forest through the mechanism of a grant-making body such as the RAC.

Recognizing that each interest group has a distinctive perspective on current priorities in forest management and a distinctive vision of the future, this case study is an opportunity to consider the limits of the RAC as a mechanism to overcome the adversarial relations of the past at a time when key actors have yet to acknowledge the necessity and inevitability of compromise, or the possibility of finding areas of common interest. It also considers how elected county officials have responded to new opportunities to identify and support forest-related projects for their communities using Title III funds. Finally, in undertaking this case study in Pennsylvania, the Sierra Institute is addressing the question of the applicability of P.L.106-393 to Eastern forests and communities, or whether, as some critics contend, the legislation is primarily suited to western ecologies and socio-economic conditions.

Background Context

The four counties surrounding the Allegheny National Forest vary in population, in the diversity and strength of their local economies, and in their degree of dependence on the forest. Each county has responded in the light of its own social and economic conditions to the opportunities afforded by P.L.106-393. In 2001, only Forest County elected to take secure payments, while Elk, McKean, and Warren counties initially stayed with the earlier 25% system of payments, switching in 2003 to secure payments under Title I and Title III of P.L.106-393 (Table 1).

Forest County is the smallest of the four counties, with a significantly lower population than the others. There are few opportunities for employment outside the timber sector, although a state correctional facility has recently opened, providing some new jobs. McKean County is considerably larger, but was also heavily dependent on timber and related forest-based industries. Warren County, by contrast, enjoys adequate road and communications links with larger urban and industrial centers, and has a relatively diverse economy including oil and gas, manufacturing, metals, plastics, and a

Table 1: Elk, Forest, McKean, and Warren Counties: Area, Population, and Date of election to take secure payments under P.L. 106-393.

County	County Seat	Area (sq. miles)	Population (2004)	Date for Title III
Elk	Ridgway	829	34,064	2003
Forest	Tionesta	428	4,994	2001
McKean	Smethport	982	44,708	2003
Warren	Warren	884	42,576	2003

varied service sector in the county seat of Warren. In Elk County, the forestry sector is complemented by agriculture and small industries such as powder metals, natural gas, and a modest but growing tourism industry in the county seat of Ridgway.

The Allegheny National Forest is located within one day's drive from approximately one-third of the population of the United States. It was established in 1923 and covers over 500,000 acres in northwestern Pennsylvania, incorporating parts of Elk, Forest, McKean, and Warren counties. The forest is now the source of a significant portion of the world's supply of veneer-quality black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), a species so prized in the furniture industry that the Allegheny National Forest has the potential to be one of the most commercially valuable forests in the national forest system. As an early successional species, however, the prominence of black cherry in the present forest ecosystem is the outcome of nearly a century of clearance, followed by well over half a century of protection. The ecology of the Allegheny National Forest has become the source of bitter conflicts over contested visions of the forest as a continuing source of valuable hardwood timber (in effect, managing for a state of arrested succession), or as a site for the restoration of processes of natural succession and the preservation of remaining islands of old growth.

Polarization has been so intense that a recent study has referred to the conflicts on the forest as "The Agony of an American Wilderness"

(MacDonald 2005). The four counties and most of the stakeholders have not been ready to take the risk of working together through a RAC, which requires working together to reach common ground and to establish consensus on the use of Title II funds for projects benefiting the national forest. They have yet to be convinced that the benefits to their counties of a RAC would compensate for what they perceive to be the risk of legitimating alternative visions of the future of management on the national forest, and for the transfer of control over funds to what they fear would be a fractious forum for the representatives of interests with a continuing history of adversarial relations. The legacy of the past is only one of the factors shaping responses to the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, but it is important enough to justify a brief review of the history of the land that is now the Allegheny National Forest.

At the time of the War of Independence, the Seneca Indians, members of the Iroquois League, occupied the Allegheny plateau of northwestern Pennsylvania. Their land was a mixed forest of eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*), and a mix of other hardwoods. Although the Seneca lost their land as a result of their alliance with the British, the poor soils, harsh winters, and dense forest continued to make the area all but inaccessible to settlers. It was only after the Civil War that construction of the railway linking central Pennsylvania to the port of Erie made the forests of the Allegheny

plateau a resource, not an impediment to development. The forests first supplied wood to power and maintain the railway, and the area later became one of the world's most productive oil fields following the sinking of the first successful oil well in 1859. By the 1880s, gas had become as important as oil, attracting energy-intensive industries, the most important of which was glass manufacturing.

At the same time that the oil and gas industries began to transform the landscape, the abundance of hemlock launched a tanning industry using tannin extracted from the bark to process buffalo hides brought in by rail from the prairies of the Midwest. When the last bison had been hunted, the tanneries switched to processing cattle hides imported from the ranches and pampas of South America. The railway also transformed the economics of timber production, opening access to what had previously been impenetrable forest, and providing cheap transportation to urban markets. Still later, at the turn of the century, the small diameter trees that logging had passed by became the raw material for a wood chemicals and wood fiber industry fueled by the forest's oil and gas resources.

By the 1920s, the succession of extractive industries had denuded the landscape. What had become known popularly as 'the Allegheny Brush Heap' was the source of such severe erosion that Congress established the Allegheny National Forest in 1923 to restore the vegetation and hydrologic function of the watershed. At the time, most of what became the Allegheny was in the hands of three large timber companies and a number of smallholders, some of whom were initially unwilling to sell their land. By 2003, the Forest Service had purchased 513,257 acres of what had been private and industrial land, or approximately 69% of the 742,693 acres within the identified boundaries of the forest (US Forest Service 2003).¹

The eight decades since the proclamation of the Allegheny National Forest have seen a dramatic recovery and regeneration of forest cover. As a

consequence of the clearance of the earlier mixed conifer and hardwood forest, hardwood species such as black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), and oaks (*Quercus* spp.), that had previously been suppressed in the understory or present only in clearings now dominate, forming a new forest type classified as "Allegheny Hardwood."

During the first 50 years of regeneration and re-growth, there was inevitably only very limited harvesting on the Allegheny National Forest. The economies of the four counties surrounding the forest continued to experience fitful periods of growth and decline in concert with the rise and decline of industries such as electrical equipment, pulp and paper, manufacturing, powdered metals, and plastics. By the 1970s, black cherry and other hardwoods on the forest had reached marketable size, opening the way for a revived timber industry. In 1986, when the Forest Service prepared its first forest management plan for the Allegheny National Forest, it projected an annual timber harvest of over 94 million board feet (MMBF). In fact, this level was reached only once, in 1987, with an average harvest over the next six years (1988 to 1993) of 73.5 MMBF. Since then, harvest levels declined to a low in 2000 of 14.2 MMBF, rising again slightly to reach 17.0 MMBF in 2004. Figure 1 shows the volume and value of timber harvested between 1987 and 2004.

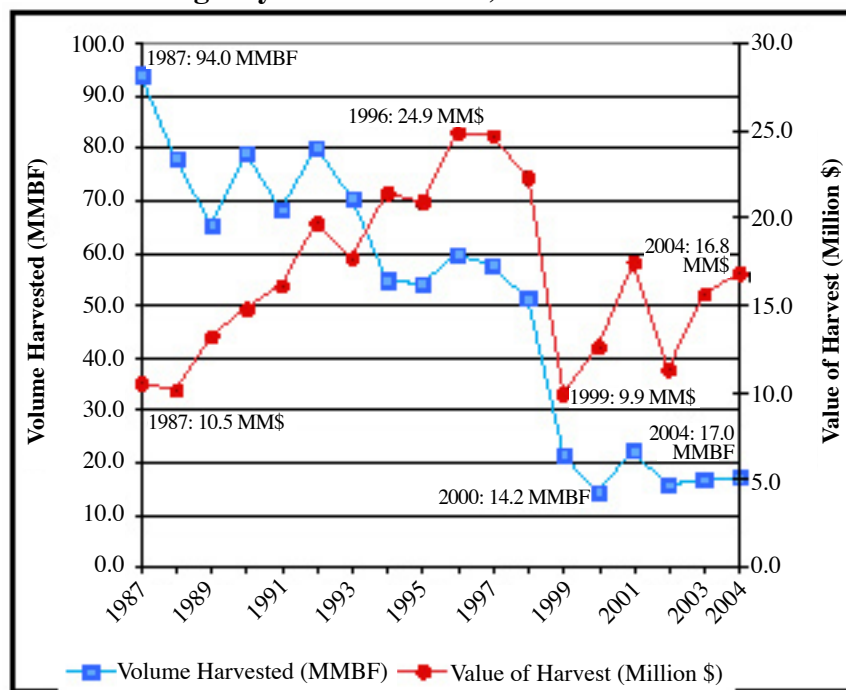
Data on timber harvest on the Allegheny National Forest give only a partial picture of the role of the timber economy in the four counties surrounding it. Some 30% of the land within the boundaries of the national forest remains in private hands and there are further large tracts of forestland in neighboring state forests as well as extensive industrial and non-industrial private lands nearby. Opponents of intensive timber harvesting on the national forest contend that improved management on state and private lands would support a healthy timber industry in the area while allowing for reduced harvesting on the national forest. Proponents of a higher level of

¹ This brief summary of the history of the Allegheny National Forest draws heavily on the opening chapter of MacDonald (2005), and on the introductory sections of Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (2003).

harvesting on the national forest, on the other hand, point to difficulties non-industrial landowners face in marketing their timber when large corporations that will not process small sales increasingly dominate the industry. Under these circumstances, they argue that the national forest has a mandate to offer a reliable supply of logs to nearby forestry enterprises and sawmills.

The four counties' decisions and their debates about P.L. 106-393 reflect a struggle over the ways in which local resources managed in the public interest by a federal agency should contribute to the provision of essential services to rural communities. In the Allegheny context, there are sharply diverging interpretations of what constitutes the public interest and who should define it.

Figure 1: Volume and Value of Timber Harvested from the Allegheny National Forest, 1987 - 2004.



Source: US Forest Service 2005

County Decisions to Choose Secure Payments under P.L.106-393

P.L. 106-393 is predicated on the principle that forest counties should receive some form of payment for public lands within their boundaries to cover their primary responsibilities for providing education to their children and ensuring transport and communications with an adequate, well-maintained road network. In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, however, counties are responsible

for neither education nor roads. Education is under the jurisdiction of independent school districts whose boundaries do not always coincide with county boundaries. Roads come under the purview of municipalities and townships, which are administratively below counties. Although counties did have to address the consequences of a declining timber sector, including unemployment and its eco-

conomic impacts, their budgets did not directly suffer a loss of revenue from reduced timber harvests.

Pennsylvania Congressman John Peterson informed the four counties of the passage of P.L.106-393 and provided some background information by e-mail. In the counties surrounding the Allegheny National Forest, the U.S. Forest Service appears to have been preoccupied with the legal challenges to its management of the forest, and did not play the same leading role in disseminating information about the legislation that it did in other parts of the country. Instead, a local organization, the Allegheny Forest Association (AFA), took the lead and held workshops to disseminate information about the legislation and AFA's interpretation of its implications. Elected county officials, representatives of the townships and school districts, U.S. Forest Service staff, and interested members of the public attended the workshops at which AFA expressed its reservations about the system of payments under P.L.106-393.

In the highly polarized environment that existed in the area, AFA had the resources to set the parameters of discussion about P.L.106-393. The AFA has an unambiguous commitment to promoting a thriving timber industry on the forest, and framed its case in terms of the need to retain a direct link between the level of timber harvest on the Allegheny National Forest, and local provision of education and road maintenance. Using projections based on the Allegheny Forest Plan, AFA argued that the value of future timber harvests would be high enough to continue to provide adequate revenue for schools and roads under the 25% payments system. AFA also suggested that "decoupling," or severing the connection between timber harvesting and funding for local schools and roads would limit counties' standing to challenge litigation over timber harvesting, making it easier in the future for the Forest Service to reduce the level of harvesting in favor of recreation, conservation, and other non-consumptive uses.

Elk, McKean, and Warren counties chose to retain the 25% revenue payments. Forest County, however, has a less diverse economy, and is more

dependent on timber from the national forest to generate employment directly, as well as through businesses associated with and supporting the timber sector. The Forest Area School District, which had been covering up to 10 mills of tax in its budget from timber revenue, was acutely conscious of its inability to raise revenue from other sources, and its vulnerability to reductions in timber harvest payments. The school district urged the county commissioners to take action to avoid the cuts in school budgets, which they saw as inevitable in view of threatened challenges to timber harvesting on the national forest. Forest County commissioners observed that past projections of timber harvest levels had never matched actual harvest levels, long before litigation peaked. The commissioners also consulted with the county solicitor, who concluded that receiving payments under P.L.106-393 would not affect the county's legal standing in the event of future litigation. Accordingly, in 2001, Forest County took the first available opportunity to move to secure payments from the 25% payments, despite misgivings about what it interpreted as a trend away from timber management on the national forest.

Forest County was the only county to move away from the 25% payments in 2001, but the issues commissioners addressed in making the decision were common to all four counties. Elk, McKean, and Warren counties responded differently to them, however, largely because they abided by AFA's following analysis of future harvest levels, and of the implications of electing to take secure payments:

1. There would not be a reduction in the value of timber harvested.
2. Acceptance of payments under P.L.106-393 would compromise counties' claims to a voice in decisions about management of the national forest.
3. School districts and townships would not fare much worse by staying in the original timber receipt program.

The three counties that stayed with the 25% payments had hoped or expected that the reduced

timber harvests they were witnessing were temporary artifacts of contentious litigation and that harvesting would shortly resume at or near projected levels. By 2003, it had become clear that both the volume of timber harvests and revenue would remain significantly lower than planned. While counties did not suffer directly from reduced revenues, school districts and townships faced immediate financial difficulties. Struggling to meet their budgetary obligations with shrinking incomes, they pressed the counties to reverse their earlier decision, and to elect to take the secure payments guaranteed under P.L.106-393.

In the two years since their initial decision to continue receiving 25% payments, counties had also come to recognize that Title III funds would give them revenue which they did not previously have. They were receiving PILT payments for the public land within their boundaries, but the amounts were too small to be used to invest in the well-being and future of the counties. McKean County, for example, receives some \$36,000 annually in PILT payments for the 135,346 acres of national forest in the county—approximately \$1.77 per acre of Federal land. Under P.L.106-393, the county's share (Title III) of a total payment of \$1.6 million comes to over \$245,000, or about \$12 per acre. The increased revenue generated by Title III payments would add significantly to the county's budget (Lane 2005).

The Allegheny Forest Alliance (AFA) has consistently expressed its support for a revival of the timber economy in the language of a determined opposition to “decoupling” payments to counties from forest management. AFA's vision of timber-focused forest management is shared by the Allegheny Hardwood Utilization Group, a wider organization of individuals, organizations, and businesses with an interest in a vibrant timber sector in the region. Initially, AFA interpreted P.L.106-393 as opening the door to permanent reductions or halts in timber operations, portraying the legislation as decoupling forest management from community

well-being. It later came to conclude that P.L.106-393 held the promise of a return at some point in the future to levels of timber harvesting comparable to the past, reconsidered its earlier dissatisfaction with the secure payments legislation, and recommended acceptance of secure payments, while continuing to frame its analysis in terms of its opposition to decoupling.

The focus on the concept of decoupling has obscured debate on the long-term significance of secure payments to counties. In perpetuating a polarized argument cast in terms of an irreconcilable conflict between timber interests and advocates of conservation and preservation, it has left little space for consideration of alternative perspectives on forest health and on the future of forest management. Nevertheless, some interest groups and county commissioners see the passage of P.L.106-393 as a positive development. They believe that its guarantee of a measure of security for rural schools is allowing for movement toward more measured, less confrontational, reflection about the future. They also recognize that Title III funding is unusual in giving considerable latitude to counties in selecting their priorities for how to use it—furthering the legislation's stated goal of promoting “county self-determination.”

In the first two years of the implementation of P.L. 106-393 in Forest County and in other forest communities around the country, county commissioners learned that Title III payments offered the prospect of what several informants referred to as a “windfall” in county revenues, allowing them to cover the costs of services on the national forest—including fire protection, communications, and law enforcement—that they are currently expected to provide with no other form of compensation. In 2003, following their own interest in receiving Title III funds, and responding to the pressure they also faced from townships and school districts, Elk, McKean, and Warren counties all elected to receive secure payments under P.L.106-393.

Title III Projects

Forest County now has three years of experience funding projects under Title III. Elk, McKean, and Warren counties are still considering how best to use the income, and are developing the procedures for soliciting and selecting projects. In addition to covering the costs of services such as search and rescue, and law enforcement, all four counties are exploring how to invest in projects that will build human capital and diversify their economies to better equip them to face the challenges of changing economies and demographics. Appendix A is a table showing the four counties' allocations of Title III funds as of mid November, 2005.

Forest County has found that once interested individuals and organizations knew that funds were available, they took the initiative to present enough projects that the county has not felt it necessary to solicit more proposals. In Warren County, where the commissioners held well-attended meetings to inform the public about the availability of Title III funds, the public has also been quick to take advantage of the opportunity to submit project proposals. McKean and Elk counties, by contrast, have had few responses to notices placed in the local press, with more interest shown when they have contacted individuals and organizations directly to encourage them to send in proposals. McKean County commissioners believe that many local nonprofit and volunteer organizations are disillusioned after having had little success in the past in securing grants from various sources, and that they are now reluctant to apply once again for funding through another unfamiliar and untested channel.

If the public response has been mixed, local government departments in all four counties, whose activities make them eligible to receive funds, have been quick to approach commissioners with proposals. Forest, McKean, and Warren counties have all approved grants to their sheriff's offices for search and rescue operations and training, and to improve communications on national forest land. Forest County has also approved proposals from local fire departments and ambulance companies to

approve the use of Title III funds to provide services on national forest land. On one occasion, commissioners rejected a proposal from a teacher within the Forest Area School District, on the grounds that it did not constitute a project as required under the legislation.

All four counties are using Title III funds to develop forestry-related educational programs, which would not otherwise be a part of the schools' curriculum. Projects include a proposal for a 'History Trunk' containing information and artifacts related to the history of the forests of Warren County (\$10,000), and a special exhibition on the fauna of the Allegheny National Forest organized by the McKean Historical Society (\$10,000). Counties have also made grants to community-based organizations such as the Boy Scouts (Warren County) and 4-H clubs (McKean County dedicated \$62,000 in 2005, and is considering another \$52,000 in 2006) for forest education-related programs. In order to encourage more individual forestland owners to actively manage their land, Forest, McKean, and Warren counties are all working with their conservation districts to establish and support educational centers that will offer training in forest-based conservation activities.

Given the importance of forest management on private lands as a component of the regional forest economy, the four counties are currently considering proposals from Pennsylvania State University for two programs targeting youth and young adults. One offers training in basic skills in natural resource management, the other proposes a more career-oriented, leadership-training program. Opinions differ, however, as to the value of these programs. McKean County is hesitant to initiate a multi-year program at a time when it is not clear whether P.L.106-393 will be re-authorized. Warren County is concerned about the cost of the program (estimated at \$95,000 for Warren County), and there is some skepticism at the presumption that educational programs emphasizing the positive aspects of timber management would

in fact reduce the challenges to timber harvesting on the National Forest.

Grants for activities that diversify the local economy mostly support efforts to develop tourism. McKean County has been the most active in approving grants to improve access to trails (including one easement over private land), and partial funding for a book published by the Allegheny National Forest Vacation Bureau and a CD-ROM on the county's forest heritage. Perhaps the most innovative project is one that is still under discussion in Elk County, with goals of linking heritage tourism with training and job-creation through a revival of traditional woodcrafts. The county seat of Ridgway boasts many historic houses built by wealthy landowners and entrepreneurs during the boom years of the late nineteenth century. The proposed project would use Title III funds to involve the few remaining woodworkers in teaching their skills to disabled and at-risk youth while restoring these houses. The project would have the benefit of teaching skills and generating employment in a niche industry related to the forest, while at the same time enhancing the county's tourism assets, and educating both residents and visitors about the role of the Allegheny National Forest in the county's history and economy.

One constraint county officials indicated they had in the selection of Title III projects is the difficulty in determining whether or not a project conforms to the authorized uses of funds under the legislation. Commissioners in all four counties said that they had often not been able to determine whether or not a project comported with the legislation. When questions about projects arose, they

turned to Forest Service district rangers or to the Office of General Counsel for clarification, even though they are aware that the Forest Service is only responsible for administering Title II funds, not Title III. The Forest Service, in turn, has encouraged counties to consult with their solicitors for an interpretation of the law. The consensus is that it would be helpful either to allow greater latitude in the use of funds, or to make it clear where counties can go to for authoritative advice when needed.

At the time of the passage of P.L.106-393, the Allegheny National Forest was embroiled in bitter confrontation between interest groups favoring timber production and those calling for a halt to timber harvesting in favor of conservation. As counties have moved to accept Title III, there are signs that the terms of the debate may be shifting. A leading member of the Allegheny Defense Project believes that the secure payments program and funding for Title III projects support efforts to diversify the economy, which this individual considered to be a step in the direction of finding common ground between otherwise adversarial interests. Others, including representatives of recreation interests and the private timber sector, echoed his comments. The Allegheny Hardwood Utilization Group was one of the few organizations to express dissatisfaction with the impacts of the legislation on the grounds that it has not generated a better understanding of forestry and the importance of forest management. On the whole, though, informants were positive in their assessments and felt that counties were making good use of Title III funds to bring a wider range of actors into decisions about activities on the National Forest.

Considering Title II

The counties, stakeholders, and national forest staff have all been involved in debates about the advisability and the feasibility of forming a RAC. In view of the interesting array of projects approved under Title III and the way it has brought new voices into decision-making, it is perhaps surprising that none of the counties has yet elected to

allocate funds to Title II and to establish a Resource Advisory Committee (RAC). When asked why this might be, the immediate response of most informants is that relations between interest groups on the Allegheny National Forest are so sharply polarized that it would not be possible to bring different actors together around the same table. Some county

officials said bluntly that they did not want to have to sit at the same table as environmentalists. Other informants said that, even if it were possible to form a RAC including representatives of all of the categories required under Title II, there would be little chance of a constructive dialogue in search of common ground.

The AFA has taken the initiative to invite two experienced staff from the Forest Service in Oregon to visit Pennsylvania to talk about their experience with RACs. Both visitors came away with the impression that staff on the Allegheny National Forest were reluctant to invite further, possibly contentious public involvement in the form of a RAC at a time when they felt that responding to the litigation they faced was already consuming all available resources. Based on their experience in Oregon, however, both visitors believed that a RAC might in fact offer a platform from which to step back from past conflicts and to begin to look for areas of agreement rather than disagreement.

Reflecting on the possibility of initiating a dialogue through a RAC, a senior member of staff on the Allegheny National Forest felt that the mandated composition of the committee is problematic. The legislation requires representation of interest groups, rather than representation of communities. Where tension and conflict are still alive and raw, as they are on the Allegheny National Forest, a RAC consisting of interest groups risks reinforcing divisions rather than offering opportunities for dialogue and a search for common ground. In a similar vein, the Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness advocates bringing a wide range of concerned citizens into discussions aimed at reaching a consensus about balancing different uses of the forest, rather than placing people in predetermined categories associated with particular values and interests. Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness felt that, in the present atmosphere of divisive confrontation, a selection of RAC members based on representation of interested communities was more likely to take the first step towards a search for agreement than entrench the divisions and confrontation between interest groups.

The degree of polarization between environ-

mental and timber industry advocates is a factor in the reluctance of the four counties to allocate funds to Title II. There is, nevertheless, support for establishing a RAC among a number of local groups with an interest in the future of the Allegheny National Forest. The Tionesta Valley ATV Association, the Allegheny Hardwood Utilization Group, and the Friends of the Allegheny Wilderness, for example, all believe that there would be value in establishing a RAC, indicating that there are organizations and individuals who feel left out of the debates, and who would be likely to contribute to the success of a RAC if one were formed.

The readiness with which conflict between “environmentalists” and “the timber industry” is invoked appears to hide other, more nuanced questions of concern to counties, to the various interest groups and local residents, and to Forest Service staff working on the Allegheny National Forest. In fact, informants alluded to a number of other issues they considered important. These included the question of how much funding would be available if each county were to establish a separate RAC; the burden of facilitating a functional RAC; the reluctance of the Forest Service to act as an enthusiastic champion of Title II funding and RACs; and the loss of county control over who sits on a RAC, selects projects, and ultimately approves Title II projects and disburses funds.

To better understand the range of concerns that have so far prevented counties from electing to allocate funds to Title II, it is useful to examine the issues as seen by the three main sets of actors: the counties, local stakeholders and interest groups, and the Forest Service.

Counties

Title III of P.L.106-393 gives counties access to a pool of funds that they did not have before. County commissioners value the autonomy they have under Title III to identify and determine their priorities for funding. Any allocation of funds to Title II would come at the expense of the Title III funds directly controlled by the county, and some elected officials are unhappy that Title II

projects must benefit the national forest. They believe that on a forest where timber harvests can be a profitable undertaking, the Forest Service, not the community, should be responsible for the kinds of projects to which Title II funds should be dedicated.

A related concern for the counties is the degree of outside control over the RAC and RAC projects. County commissioners approve projects under Title III and monitor expenditures and outcomes themselves. They do not have the same level of decision-making and direct oversight over the use of Title II funds. Nominations to the RAC must be approved by the Secretary for Agriculture in Washington D.C. The forest supervisor's office can reject proposals the RAC has approved, and the Forest Service is responsible for contracting, disbursing funds, and monitoring projects.

The logistics of establishing and supporting a RAC are daunting. County commissioners fear that they would incur a heavy additional workload in identifying enough people willing to serve on a RAC, and in coordinating with the RAC and the Forest Service to solicit, review, and respond to proposals for funding. They wondered whether the amount of funds involved would justify their investment of time and effort. Even if each of the four counties on the Allegheny National Forest were to allocate all of its 2005 Title III payments to Title II, the funds available to a RAC would vary between \$205,506 for Elk County, to \$269,585 for Warren County (Table 2).

Forest County, for example, has considered the idea of forming a RAC, but the commissioners felt that a small county with a population of less than 5,000 would have little to gain. They pointed out that it is already difficult to find interested

members of the public to fill all the committees that are a part of local governance, and that it would be even more difficult to find people representing the various interest group categories on a RAC.

Moreover, given the importance of Title III funds to the county, commissioners would only be prepared to allocate a portion of Title III funds to Title II, raising questions about how much, or what, a RAC could achieve with the modest funds it would have at its disposal. The commissioners were open to the possibility of forming a RAC, but only if other counties would be prepared to join them, each contributing funds to make a joint RAC a worthwhile undertaking.

All four counties believed that a RAC would have to cover more than one county, although they were uncertain how many counties were needed to make it viable. It did not seem, though, that there was pressure from any of the counties to enter into partnerships to establish a multi-county RAC. Several commissioners did feel that a RAC would give more flexibility in the use of grants than Title III funds and that RAC projects could play a part in putting in place some of the facilities needed to build and to invigorate a forest-based tourist industry. Memories of failed efforts to collaborate in the past over projects and joint provision of services have, however, made the counties wary of launching new joint initiatives. Uncertainty over reauthorization of P.L.106-393 only increases reticence to invest energy in a RAC about which there exists so many questions and doubts. Counties also appear not to want to give up the windfall that Title III is proving to be.

Table 2: Allegheny National Forest, 2005 Payments to Eligible Counties under P.L. 106-393.

County	Title III	Title III%
Elk	\$205,506	15
Forest	\$218,539	15
McKean	\$248,796	15
Warren	\$269,585	15

Source: US Forest Service 2005 (a)

Local Stakeholders and Interest Groups

There is no unanimity among local stakeholders about whether a RAC would be a desirable innovation or not. Some groups fear that what they imagine would be the consequences of a committee selected to represent a range of interests empowered to select and to fund projects for the benefit of the national forest. The Allegheny Forest Alliance fears that funding projects that are unrelated to timber management would mark a step in the direction of decoupling community welfare from forest management, and would continue to marginalize timber harvesting as a legitimate use of the forest. The Allegheny Defense Project (ADP), by contrast, fears that timber interests and their allies are so entrenched in the counties surrounding the forest that they would dominate a RAC, despite the RAC requirement to include representatives of conservation interests.

Other groups agree that a RAC could be an institution in which their voices could be heard at a time when public discourse over forest management is dominated by the poles of opinion. From the perspective of the forestry sector, the Allegheny Hardwood Utilization Group feels that a RAC that could identify opportunities to benefit the whole community would be a more effective way than Title III to foster greater public understanding of forest management. A number of other interviewees were hopeful, too, that if a RAC was created, it could approve projects demonstrating that extractive use of forest resources does not inevitably preclude the preservation and conservation of places valued by all as wild, scenic, and a source of inspiration.

Positive reactions to the possible value of a RAC have not translated into pressure on elected representatives to allocate funding to Title II. Even some of those who were favorable to the idea questioned whether a RAC would be able to avoid the same fate as a recent forum sponsored by Pennsylvania Congressman John Peterson to reach a broad-based consensus on wilderness designation. After two years of work, the efforts of the forum were brought to a halt by litigation challenging the plan it was preparing to present to

Congress for approval. Given the degree of polarization and mistrust surrounding management of the Allegheny National Forest, most local stakeholders are ready to accept that county commissioners are making good use of Title III funds, and can be trusted to continue that way.

The Forest Service

Counties alone have the authority to decide whether to allocate funds to Title II. Nevertheless, since the Forest Service plays an important role in facilitating the formation of a RAC, as well as in the final approval of recommended projects, the degree of commitment of the forest supervisor and staff in the supervisor's office can be the critical factor that sways county supervisors to decide in favor of or against Title II.

There is general agreement that the supervisor of the Allegheny National Forest at the time of the passage of P.L.106-393 did not champion the formation of a RAC. Informants who knew him and had spoken with him said that his hesitation was at least partly out of a concern that his staff could not take on the extra workload that would be involved at a time when they were working on the new forest plan as well as addressing the many issues raised by litigation on the forest.

Both of the visitors from the Forest Service in Oregon remarked that the supervisor had seemed reluctant to advocate for a mechanism to bring further public input into what was already a complicated and tense situation. The Supervisor also contrasted national forests in the Western states with the smaller Eastern forests, concluding that RACs would not have the resources needed to have the kind of impact that they were having in the West.

Local and agency officials alike retained the sense that whatever the intent of the legislation, it is more suited to conditions in the Western states than in the East. Interviewees referred to the importance accorded to planning for fire prevention and homeowner education as being appropriate to Western forests, but less relevant in the East. Private forestland is an important source of harvested timber in the East, and staff

on the Allegheny National Forest would have welcomed more flexible use of Title II Funds to purchase easements not only for conservation and recreation purposes, but also to consolidate land to avoid the patchwork pattern of landholding that characterizes a forest like the Allegheny National Forest—a purpose which would probably not comport with the present legislation. Although Title II, in fact, authorizes RACs to approve a wide range

of projects benefiting both the community and the national forest, like the county commissioners, Forest Service officials have concluded that the categories of funding would not address their issues and most pressing needs. As a result, neither party has so far shown great interest in making the investment of time and human resources that would be needed to form a RAC.

Conclusion

The four counties surrounding the Allegheny National Forest have now all elected to take secure payments under P.L.106-393. Three of the four counties hesitated to move to secure payments, preferring to retain the earlier system of 25% of timber revenues for two years. None of the counties has chosen to allocate any of its payments to Title II, preferring to retain direct county control over funding decisions through Title III. One of the main factors in this decision has been that, in Pennsylvania, counties are not responsible for schools and roads, so Title III funds represent a welcome addition to county budgets that they did not have in the past.

The four counties' reluctance to allocate resources to a RAC is a consequence of the continued conflict and tension over timber harvests and management practices on the Allegheny National Forest, reminiscent of the "timber wars" of the 1980s and 1990s in Western forests. The response of counties, the Forest Service, and local stakeholders to P.L.106-393 is a reminder that a mechanism such as the RAC can only contribute to the process of initiating a dialogue when the timing and the conditions are conducive to build trust and respect between different interests. On the Allegheny National Forest, Forest Service staff and key interest groups are still focused on addressing conflict and the consequences of legal decisions from ongoing litigation that accentuates their differences, rather than fostering the will to look for common ground. There are some indications that this is changing and that conditions are developing for a mechanism such as a RAC to contribute to the search for

agreement. Some of the key and most vocal actors have left the area, and as counties look urgently for opportunities to diversify their economies, the outlines of one area of convergence of interests are emerging in moves to improve the prospects for forest-related tourism. There have been and still are profound differences in visions of the future of the forest and of forest communities, but the involvement of some new actors allows for the possibility of stepping back from entrenched positions to take a fresh approach to old questions.

Some of the issues that run through discussions of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act in the counties surrounding the Allegheny National Forest are not unique to Pennsylvania. Forest Service staff and county officials feel that they have few sources of information to turn to (other than networks and personal contacts) in making decisions about the implementation of the legislation. The most active organization driving debate about Title III and Title II has been the AFA, which has drawn on its strong links with the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition for advice. There is no question that the AFA has every right to articulate its position, but it is ironic that an organization with an acknowledged and unambiguous agenda to see a return to higher levels of timber harvest on the forest has become the principal source of information on this legislation—one goal of which is to defuse entrenched conflicts over forest management.

The multi-interest composition of a RAC has proved to be a factor deterring counties from allo-

cating funds to Title II, and discouraging key interest groups from advocating for Title II. Counties have yet to accept that a RAC could promote constructive dialogue rather than continued confrontation. Conservation interests believe that timber interests would dominate the committee, while timber interests fear that it would become a platform for the expression of “extreme” environmental views. Legitimacy and credibility of representation on a RAC are vital issues, and in the area of the Allegheny National Forest there is little confidence that a RAC would represent the spectrum of interests in the community, rather than predetermined communities of interest.

Looking towards the future, there is a consensus that, with reauthorization of P.L.106-393, it would be possible to make further progress towards

a common vision for the future of relations between the forest and forest communities. There is less confidence that secure payments alone are a long-term solution to the social and economic challenges facing resource-dependent rural communities. Elected officials and agency staff struggle with an array of policies affecting land use, varying from PILT payments to counties, to complex legislation on environmental protection and conservation, to requirements for federal agencies to engage in planning that satisfies both national and local interests. Their hope is that they will see a shift from piecemeal legislation to a debate that would lead to a coherent set of policies supporting their communities and providing compensation for the loss of the tax base, while promoting responsible stewardship of public lands and sustainable management of resources.

Appendix 1

ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST. Elk County, Forest County, McKean County, Warren County - Title III Allocations for 2002 - 2005.

[Forest County has received Title III funds since 2002. Elk, McKean, and Warren Counties have received Title III funds since 2004]

	Project	Amount (\$)
Elk County*		
2004	[Allocation]	202,869.00
2005	[Allocation]	205,506.00
	Balance (2005)	412,433.58
Forest County**		
2002	[Allocation]	210,475.88
	Kimball & Associates (911 mapping - emergency planning)	35,000.00
	Planning / Conservation	25,483.90
	Fire Co. and ambulance	116,200.31
	Howe township (fire hydrant / fire protection)	1,729.86
	Balance (2002)	32,061.81
2003	[Allocation]	213,033.99
	Kimball & Associates (911 mapping - emergency planning)	35,000.00
	Planning / Conservation	38,500.00
	Forest County Sheriff - Radio equipment	13,778.88
	Fire Co. and ambulance	136,400.00
	Assessment	5,600.00
	Title III Ads.	626.10
	Balance (2003)	- 16,870.99
2004	[Allocation]	215,838.53
	Kimball & Associates	35,000.00
	Planning Conservation	38,500.00
	Fire Co. and ambulance	136,400.62
	Forestry education	300,700.00
	Balance (2004)	- 294,762.09
2005	[Allocation]	218,539.00
McKean County		
2004	[Allocation]	257,000 / 245,603***
	Easement for Kinzua trails	100,000.00

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	Allegheny Vacation Bureau (Educational book & CD on the Allegheny National Forest)	80,000.00
	4-H Clubs (Forestry education for youth)	62,000.00
	Forest County (County cooperation in forest education)	15,000.00
	Search and rescue dive team	5,000.00
	Balance (2004)	- 5,000.00
2005	[Allocation]	248,796.00
Warren County		
2004	[Allocation]	266,126.00
	Warren County Conservation District Hatch Run Education Center (including \$62.76 advertising to solicit project proposals)	200,062.76
	Warren County 911 Center - radio/ wireless equipment for use in Allegheny NF (including \$44.52 to solicit project proposals)	9,544.52
	Warren County Bike / Hike Trail extension project (including \$49.08 advertising for to solicit project proposals)	10,049.08
	General advertising to solicit projects	47.56
	Balance (2004)	10,001.52
2005****	[Allocation]	269,585
	Warren County Historical Society, Allegheny National Forest Education (including \$58.13 advertising)	20,618.13
	Warren County Conservation District Hatch Run Education Center - additional funds (including \$262.05 advertising)	25,262.05
	Warren County Cooperative Extension After School Program	(Amount to be determined)
	Balance (November 2005)	45,880.18

* As of November 2000, Elk county had not yet allocated any of its Title III funds.

** Forest County: allocations for FY 2002, 2003, 2004 have all been received, and therefore allocated in the following calendar year.

Positive and negative balances for each year do not take into account carryover from the preceding year.

*** McKean County received its allocation of \$245,603 in 2004, but did not disburse the funds until Spring 2005 by which time accrued interest on the funds brought the total to \$250,000.

**** The balance for 2005 does not include the carryover from 2004.

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