

Labrador introduces bill to allow locals, states to manage federal lands

Dan Popkey/news release

Congressman Raúl Labrador, R-Idaho, on Thursday reintroduced a bill that will allow state and local management of federally-owned forests and improve forest health, boost local economies and save taxpayers money.

“We in Idaho know local managers will be better stewards of the 193 million acres in the National Forest System,” Labrador said. “My bill would establish locally-operated demonstration projects across the country. The result will be healthier forests and long-term solutions for rural economies weakened by the precipitous drop in active management since the 1990s.

“The success of local control should be a model for replacing the Secure Rural Schools program, bringing financial stability to local governments reliant on payments from Washington, D.C., to make up for fallen timber receipts,” Labrador continued. “Efficient local management will provide a reliable alternative to the SRS program.”

Labrador’s Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act, H.R. 2316, was first introduced in 2012, when a bipartisan group of county commissioners proposed the idea. In 2013, the bill passed the House but wasn’t considered in the democratically controlled Senate.

The Self-Sufficient Community Lands Act would create "community forest demonstration areas" of at least 200,000 acres, not exceeding 4 million acres nationwide. Governors would appoint an Advisory Committee to oversee management. The committee must include representatives from local government, recreational users, the forest products industry and grazing or other permit holders.

Hunting and fishing rights, as well as other recreational uses and tribal rights, will be protected. Federally designated wilderness areas would be exempt from the pilot programs. The Forest Service would receive a portion of revenues and retain responsibility for firefighting.

The bill complements the efforts of the Federal Land Action Group, recently cofounded by the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee. Labrador is a member of both the committee and the new group working to provide a legislative framework for transferring federal lands to local ownership and control.

“With an \$18 trillion debt, the U.S. government can no longer afford to lose money mismanaging our public lands,” Labrador said. “States can do a better job under state forest practices laws. The result will be sustainable forests that benefit local communities and maintain public access.”