

# One man's federal subsidy is another's lifeline

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## **Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Russ Fulcher, the former Meridian state senator who is making a second run at winning the GOP's gubernatorial nomination, wants to wean Idaho from its dependence on federal money.

Or as Fulcher puts it, federal "subsidies."

Those federal dollars come with strings - and they contribute to a national debt now approaching \$20 trillion, Fulcher said in a campaign statement.

"For the sake of Idaho's long-term economic prosperity, and for the sake of our federal partner, we must strategically and gradually right-size the balance of control between the state and the federal government," Fulcher said. "A plan must be put in place to stimulate economic growth, better manage our resources and ensure that Idahoans are less dependent on our financially troubled lender."

But one person's federal subsidy is another's federal lifeline.

Case in point: The Secure Rural School dollars on which rural Idaho depends - and which are dangerously close to disappearing. Launched by former U.S. Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, SRS compensates timber communities for the dollars they lost when timber sales on U.S. national forests collapsed.

But the money has been tenuous. Congress approved the SRS as part of the Troubled Asset Relief Program in 2008. A few years later, it was attached to a transportation package. A year ago, SRS got a reprieve when it was added to a bill shoring up Medicare reimbursements to health care providers - dubbed "doc fix."

Once again this year, Idaho's congressional delegation is scrambling to rescue the program. Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch are among 29 senators - including Washington Democrats Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell and former Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders - urging their colleagues to act.

In the House, Reps. Raul Labrador and Mike Simpson have joined 50 House members - including Washington Republicans Cathy McMorris Rodgers and Dan Newhouse - who are making the same appeal.

Hanging in the balance is about \$26.4 million of help for rural Idaho. Within north central Idaho, the major recipients include:

- Idaho County - \$6.8 million, of which \$1.04 million goes toward Mountain View District's schools in Grangeville, Kooskia and Elk City, roughly 10 percent of its overall budget. Cottonwood schools are counting on about \$355,000 and Salmon River schools' share comes to \$90,000.
- Clearwater County - \$1.3 million, including \$320,000 for Orofino schools.
- Latah County - \$221,330, of which \$35,000 would go toward Moscow schools and about \$10,000 to Kendrick schools.

As usual, the fate of these dollars depends on grafting it on to a piece of must-pass legislation - either the continuing resolution that will keep the federal government running and avoid a government shutdown during the fall presidential campaign or an omnibus energy package Congress may take up later.

That's because a stand-alone SRS bill may not tug at the heartstrings of urban lawmakers or their constituents.

Labrador, who prefers a stand-alone SRS bill, voted against last year's "doc-fix" bill as too expensive. For now, he's taking a wait-and-see attitude.

But you have to wonder if SRS is the kind of program Fulcher has in mind when he talks about weaning Idaho from federal dependence - and whether, as governor, he would be willing to spend the state's scarce tax dollars to compensate timber communities

for the loss. - M.T.