

Sen. Smith sees some hope for safety net funds in March bill

BY KEN O'TOOLE
Headlight-Herald Staff

TILLAMOOK — An emergency supplemental appropriations bill to be considered in early March may be the last best hope for restoring an expired in-lieu-of-timber payments program that last year supplied some \$220 million to Oregon counties, U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith told teleconference call participants last Thursday.

Despite efforts by the state's congressional delegation, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act, or so-called safety net legislation, was not included in a spending bill last week. The safety net legislation has provided payments to counties — including Tillamook — that would otherwise have been received from logging on federal lands.

Tillamook County Commissioner Mark Labhart, who, with representatives from about half of Oregon's counties, took part in the conference call, is among those who have pointed out how critical the funding is to the county. In a report to county employees this month, he said, "The board is very concerned about the possibility of losing \$1.8 million from the Road Department's budget (about 40 percent of its budget) and \$550,000 from our general fund budget if the federal safety net funding is not reauthorized."

He said the commissioners are "actively working on this issue at all levels, and will be considering joining other counties in a cost-share effort to hire the third-largest lobbying firm in Washington, D.C., to secure reauthorization through both chambers of Congress, and eventually the president."

Labhart said that Smith told county representatives during the call that the difficulty is that the rest of the country is indifferent to the county's funding plight, and that neighboring states — Idaho, for example — don't agree on the funding formula.

Idaho Sen. Larry Craig does not support a seven-year reauthorization bill introduced by Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden this year. Craig believes Oregon counties are getting a disproportionately larger share of the payments, Labhart explained.

Smith told the county representatives that the leadership in both the Senate and House appear to be in agreement on a one-year extension of the payments. He said one long-term plan in the works calls for "increasing the pie (total revenue available for payments)" so the other recipient states, such as Idaho, get more and Oregon gets the same amount as received previously.

According to Labhart, Smith said President Bush has said he will support the emergency supplemental appropriations —

which is mainly military funding — with the county payments provision attached.

The problem, Smith said, is that there may not be support for the overall emergency supplemental, as it does not require offsets (cuts elsewhere to provide for the funding). Smith said any other funding resources call for offsets to pay for them, and that is difficult to achieve.