

Education

Marron, Rios lead Colorado push for permanent Secure Rural Schools funding

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SAGUACHE — Nearly \$1.4 million in annual Secure Rural Schools funding has become an important resource for Saguache County schools and local services, but with the latest federal authorization already approaching its end, local leaders are not waiting for another funding crisis.

Saguache County Commissioner Liza Marron and Miguel Rios, vice chair of the Center School Board, are helping lead an effort to raise Colorado's \$15,000 share in support of the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition as the organization pushes Congress to make Secure Rural Schools funding permanent.

"I was proud to work alongside the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition to help secure three years of SRS funding, and now our focus is on making this vital support for rural schools and counties permanent," Marron said.

Marron said Saguache County receives approximately \$1.4 million annually through the program. Recent school distributions included approximately \$187,000 for Mountain Valley School, \$246,000 for Moffat School and \$626,000 for Center schools.

For rural communities with significant amounts of federally owned land, Marron explained that Secure Rural Schools funding helps address the limited local revenue available from lands that are not part of the traditional property-tax base.

The federal commitment to rural forest communities stretches back more than a century. According to information Marron provided from the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition, Congress established a revenue-sharing system in 1908 that directed a portion of receipts

generated from national forest timber harvests to local schools and governments.

After timber revenues declined dramatically in the 1990s, and at the urging of the Coalition, Congress established the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act in 2000.

Congress most recently extended the program through the Secure Rural Schools Reauthorization Act of 2025. According to Congress.gov, S. 356 passed the House 399-5 after previously clearing the Senate and was signed into law Dec. 18, 2025, becoming Public Law 119-58. The law extends secure payments through fiscal year 2026 and provides for fiscal year 2024 and 2025 payments.

Marron explained that SRS funding is divided among several uses. Title I provides the largest share and passes through the county to schools. Title II funding remains with the Forest Service and can support eligible local projects through the Resource Advisory Committee process, while Title III funds remain with the county for uses including fire mitigation and search and rescue.

At least 75% of Saguache County's SRS funding goes toward Title I, Marron said.

The concern now is what happens when the latest authorization ends.

"When we distribute 2026 funds in 2027, there will be no more unless we fight again for three more years of funding," Marron said.

Rather than continuing the cycle of temporary reauthorizations, the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition is working toward a long-term solution.

Marron previously traveled to Washington, D.C., to advocate for SRS funding. Center students also made the trip with former Superintendent Carrie Zimmerman, high school principal Nicole Neufeld and adult supporters.

Rios said FFA 3 students were among those who traveled to Washington and advocated for the program.

"Their efforts helped secure this year's funding," Rios said, pointing to the approxi-

mately \$626,000 received by Center schools. "And this year, we are working to make that funding permanent."

When Rios saw Marron post about the coalition's latest effort, his reaction was immediate.

"I have to help," he recalled.

That decision quickly turned into action.

The National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition has established fundraising goals for participating states, with Colorado asked to provide \$15,000. Coalition information supplied by Marron says the organization is building support among school districts, counties and other eligible partners across the country as it advocates for long-term reauthorization.

According to Rios, George Welsh, Director of the SLV Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) recently committed \$1,500 to the effort. Saguache County committed another \$1,000. At the time of the interview, Rios said Center Consolidated School District was preparing to consider contributing another \$1,000 to \$2,000, while the Town of Center had been approached about a possible \$500 contribution.

Marron also plans to reach out to Moffat and Mountain Valley School, while the pair are looking beyond Saguache County. He has discussed approaching the Colorado Association of School Boards in hopes of generating broader statewide support.

The \$15,000 goal is for all of Colorado, not Saguache County alone. Marron believes that makes the local response particularly noteworthy.

"We are gonna be more than a third of the

support for the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition just from Saguache County," she said of the anticipated contributions.

Rios said SRS dollars have proven especially valuable during difficult economic periods and helped schools preserve programs when budgets were tight. He said Center schools were able to make significant academic gains when funding became more stable.

"If we all work together, we should be able to raise all this money and try to make this permanent," Rios said.

Marron stressed that none of the \$15,000 being raised for the coalition can come from SRS itself. Coalition guidelines specifically state that SRS funds cannot be used for coalition dues or contributions and that other appropriate local or organizational funds must be used.

The contributions will support the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition, a 501(c)(4) organization that educates elected officials about SRS and advocates for rural counties and schools. Information provided by Marron states that the coalition operates on a budget of approximately \$65,000 entirely funded by California and anticipates the next effort to secure long-term authorization will be more difficult.

For Marron and Rios, that makes the work happening now especially important.

A federal program may be debated and authorized in Washington, but in Saguache County its impact reaches local classrooms and community projects.

For more information you may contact The National Forest and Schools Coalition through Marron at 719-937-8423.

