

Statement of

**The Honorable David Finigan, Supervisor
Del Norte County, California
On behalf of the Regional Council of Rural Counties
Before the
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate**

**September 3, 2008
Sacramento, CA**

Good Afternoon Madame Chairman and thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's field briefing regarding the reauthorization of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act – a Legacy for Users (SAFETEA LU). My name is David Finigan and I am a County Supervisor from Del Norte County in Northern California, bordered by the Pacific Ocean and the State of Oregon. We are proud to consider ourselves the nature park for the state of California.

Today I am pleased to be here to represent the Regional Council of Rural Counties (RCRC), where I currently serve as Chair of the organization. Additionally, I am a member of the National Association of Counties' Transportation Steering Committee.

RCRC represents 31 of the non-urban counties of California. Our member counties make up 49 percent of California's land mass, but only 7.5 percent of the state's population. The majority of the land in our counties is owned by the federal government, mainly the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The diversity of the land in our counties, both physical and management responsibility, provide for a unique transportation network. My County of Del Norte has a population of 28,000, smaller than many college campuses. Our county is 80 percent publicly owned land and there is no direct major highway route to our county. While we appreciate and celebrate living in these beautiful, natural areas, there are also great challenges to the movement of people and goods in an efficient and safe manner.

The reauthorization of SAFTEA LU is a top priority of our organization. We have been working in a collaborative process with our county partners at the California State Association of Counties and the County Engineers Association of California to represent the needs of counties in the next surface transportation bill. We have also been an active participant in the California Stakeholder Consensus process that the California Department of Transportation convened. To that end, the RCRC Board of Directors voted in June to endorse the Consensus principles. We look forward to working with our local government partners, Caltrans, the business community and our national association to represent California through out this process.

Local jurisdictions, cities and counties have the sole responsibility of operating and managing over 80 percent of the maintained road miles in the state. The local, or secondary, road network is a critical component to a seamless transportation system. Roads that connect urban areas, roads to our national parks, roads that carry our agriculture from the farm, and roads that serve as the last mile for trucks to deliver to Target or Safeway -- these are local roads.

To keep these roads operating in a safe, efficient manner, we must be able to do proper maintenance work, repaving and upgrades as necessary. However, the needs far outweigh the available resources. A survey of California counties revealed only 3 can meet the recommended 20 year paving cycle. 32 counties are only able to repave every 50 years, while 19 are beyond 100-year repaving cycle. In many of our northern and mountain counties, the situation is exasperated by harsh winter weather. A quick estimate of the backlog for maintenance is over \$5 billion. We are currently working

with the local transportation planning agencies to develop an in depth, more accurate needs assessment of the local road network, which has not been undertaken since 1999. We need to fully understand the problem to be able to develop a solution involving federal, state and local resources.

The most important reason maintenance is so critical is safety. We know that nationally over 41,000 people died last year on our nation's highways. Over 55 percent of those people died on rural roads. According to The Road Information Program (TRIP), rural roads have more than double the fatality rate of Interstate and Freeways and California ranked in the top 5 state for rural road fatalities.

How do we conquer the problem?

First, as part of the California Consensus principles, "*Rebuild and maintain transportation infrastructure in a good state of repair,*" is one of the main policy points. Specifically, as stated in the principles, we recommend giving top priority to preservation and maintenance of the existing system of roads, highways, bridges, and transit. For rural counties, dedicating federal resources to the rural roads and the secondary highway system would dramatically help rural counties upgrade and maintain our road network. Federal monies directed to the rural highway system, through the Surface Transportation Program, have been frozen at 1991 levels, while funding for other areas of the federal program have increased by nearly 70 percent.

In California, as in most states, the majority of funding for the local road network comes from local sources. In fact over 64 percent of the total funds made available to local governments for transportation are from local sources. We are doing our part. Many counties have been able to pass local tax measures for transportation. However, the rural counties, like my county of Del Norte, with a population of 28,000, we would never be able to raise enough revenue from a local sales tax to meet our growing needs.

Additionally, for many rural counties in California, a large piece of our road maintenance budget comes from a program run by the U.S. Forest Service, authorized by the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act of 2000 (SRS). SRS provides funding to so-called "forest counties" to help fund schools and roads in areas with large amount of federal forest land. Historically, this was based on timber receipts, but has been a steady authorized level since the 2000 Act. California annually receives nearly \$70 million from SRS, which is split equally between school and county roads.

Del Norte County received \$3 million from SRS in 2007, which is 20 percent of our public works budget. Unfortunately, SRS expired last year and has yet to be reauthorized by Congress. RCRC and all California counties are working with the California delegation to find a more permanent solution to this funding shortfall. Our members would like to thank you, Madame Chairman, for your strong support of this effort. These dollars are vital to our counties for safer roads for the travelling public and educating our children.

Second, we strongly support the California Consensus principle – “*Strengthen the federal commitment to safety and security, particularly with respect to rural roads and access.*” Specifically, as stated in the principles, we support “increased funding for safety projects aimed at reducing fatalities, especially on the secondary highway system where fatalities rates are the highest.”

SAFETEA LU authorized the first program to focus federal funding solely on the safety of rural roads – the High Risk Rural Road program – which required \$90 million be spent nationally every year on rural road safety. In California this equates to roughly \$8 million annually. RCRC strongly supports the reauthorization of this program and a significant increase in funding for it.

Additionally, we support funding increases for the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP). Local governments participated in the development of California’s Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP), and plan to continue working with Caltrans to target funding to rural areas to help reduce the disproportionate fatalities.

Finally, we support the California Consensus principle to “Establish goods movement as a national economic priority.” With California remaining the number one agriculture producing state and the state that continues to move the highest quantity of goods through our ports, we support funding for goods movement. We do; however, want our partners and Members of the committee to understand that the movement of goods in California does not stop in Sacramento and trucks do not travel exclusively on the Interstates. Many Northern California counties are home to major freight routes, and yet do not have any priority in the state’s major freight plans.

For example, Del Norte County lacks any viable trade corridor, even though a trade corridor has been a formal priority project for the community for over 10 years. State Route 197/U.S. Highway 199 (197/199 corridor) is the sole direct interregional and interstate route linking U.S. Highway 101 and Interstate 5 at Grants Pass in Oregon. The corridor does not meet the standard for freight vehicles as the roads are too narrow or curvilinear. In fact, currently trucks coming to Crescent City to our one “big box” store must reload their cargo in Oregon from 70 to 45 foot trailers prior to traveling through the county.

This has been a major impediment to economic development and growth in my community which has among the lowest per capita income in the state and some of the highest rates of poverty.

The bottom line is when the Committee looks at Goods Movement; do not forget the rural areas that serve as alternative routes to the Interstates, the center of agriculture production, and the “last mile” for the delivery of products to market.

In conclusion, RCRC and all of California’s counties stand ready to work with you and members of the Senate EPW committee to craft an innovative, well balanced, well funded federal surface transportation program. In California, we are pleased to be

partners with our urban counterparts, and the state to bring a unified policy message to the Committee. It is our top priority to enhance and protect the rural quality of life and a well maintained, safe transportation system is integral to that goal. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to any questions.