

Walden: Don't count on county payments

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As Josephine County officials grapple with a looming drop in federal funding for public safety, U.S. Rep. Greg Walden says it's unlikely Congress will provide a reprieve anytime soon.

Following an address to the Rotary Club of Grants Pass, Walden on Wednesday said he'd rather push timber policy reform than continually fight an apathetic Congress over timber payments to cash-strapped counties.

County commissioners especially, he said, are in a tough spot when Congress authorizes these payments. Not only have they decreased every year since 2011, Walden said, but they come at a strange time in the budget cycle, making budgeting more difficult.

"Every time (county commissioners) say the payments won't come and Congress authorizes them at the last minute, it spreads distrust among voters," he said. "They can't count on it."

County payments were a substitute for money otherwise earned through logging revenue. When Congress restricted access to Oregon's forests in the early 1990s, Josephine County was promised an infusion of cash to fund services that had long been funded by the county's share of timber sales of federal land.

Five years ago, those payments plummeted, forcing deep cuts across all of the county's operations, most notably public safety. The checks have grown smaller annually since then. Walden, R-Hood River, said he's heard from local leaders who want the payments to stop altogether because they make it more difficult to find long-term solutions.

Although Congress is usually indifferent regarding rural Oregon's issues, Walden says those issues have been getting more attention lately.

The awareness comes with one major reservation: It's spurred by the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge led by Ammon Bundy, who wants local control of federal land.

Walden's colleagues scoffed at the occupation at first. But when he explained the dire economic straits Oregon's rural counties find themselves in, they began to change their tune.

"At first it was a joke, but it got serious really quickly," he said. "It went from 'What is happening in your district?' to, 'How can I help?'"

That aid might not come for some time. Reform moves slowly, he told the Rotary Club, and two

local industries — timber and marijuana — aren't front-and-center in Congress.

Although Oregon became the third state to legalize recreational marijuana in 2014, there's no movement on Capitol Hill to reclassify the drug or remove federal restrictions on it as a crop. That's because there's still a staunch opposition to legalization at the federal level.

"Oregon, Washington and Colorado are so far out there compared to the rest of the country," Walden said.

Before his appearance at the Rotary Club, Walden stopped by the Grants Pass Surgery Center, where he got a tour of the facilities and met with staff. CEO Steve Loftesnes told him this was the only total joint replacement facility in Southern Oregon, which Walden met with a joke: "You mean this is where you can go when you lose your weed and you get another joint?"

As the small group of surgeons and administrators chuckled, Walden continued the tour. The congressman listened to their concerns about the national healthcare system — both personal and professional — and said he'd see what he could take back to his colleagues in D.C.

"It's always helpful to talk to the people who are doing this first-hand," he said.