County services critical for federal public lands – need title

As the summer comes to an end, hundreds of millions of visitors will have spent time enjoying the national parks and other federal public lands that make up nearly one-third of the United States.

Yellowstone National Park, which spans across counties in Montana and Idaho, has reported a 20-percent increase in visitors. Arches National Park in Grand County, Utah saw record numbers of tourists over Memorial Day weekend. And Glacier National Park in Flathead County and Glacier County, Montana is on track for recording-setting visitation numbers this summer.

Counties see their populations skyrocket with visitors at national parks. Tuolumne, Mariposa and Madera Counties in California, each home to a portion of Yosemite National Park, have a total combined population of 224,000. In 2014, the park saw nearly 3.9 million visitors, 17 times as many visitors as permanent residents in the three counties.

Increased tourism is good for local economies, but counties need additional resources to meet demands for critical services by public lands visitors. Often the demands far outpace what the local property tax base can support. Record numbers of visitors lead to more traffic on county roads and bridges that provide the access routes to public lands. There are also heightened public safety needs associated with increased activity in and around federal public lands.

Counties alone cannot maintain infrastructure, emergency medical care, fire protection, trash collection, sewage systems and many other services for visitors and residents. That’s why we need the federal Payments in Lieu of Taxes program, or PILT.

For nearly 40 years, the PILT program has provided funding to counties and other local governments to offset forgone tax revenues on federal land within their boundaries. Sixty-two percent of the nation’s counties have federal public lands; many rural counties have more than 90 percent of their land area taken up by federal public land. Local governments cannot tax the property values or products derived from these lands, yet counties and their local taxpayers still pay for services provided in support of federal lands.

The federal government generates about $14 billion annually from commercial activities on federal land such as timber harvesting, oil and gas leasing and livestock grazing. The PILT program uses a small portion of this revenue to help local governments continue to provide essential services.

For 2015, Congress authorized discretionary funding of $442 million for PILT. Without mandatory full funding, PILT will remain a discretionary program – subject to the annual appropriations process – and could fall back to pre-2008 funding levels when counties received 65% or less of necessary funding for PILT, dealing a major blow to local services in areas with federal land ownership.

[INSERT COUNTY-SPECIFIC INFO – FOR EXAMPLE: My home county, Chelan County, Wash., is a rural county with substantial acreage of public lands, nearly 78 percent. This year, we received $2.4 million to help fund road maintenance, public health, environmental compliance, law enforcement and other general government services. The payments are critical, representing roughly 7.5 percent of our general fund budget and allowing us to provide a safe environment for our visitors.]

Without Congressional action guaranteeing mandatory full funding for PILT for Fiscal Year 2016 and beyond, communities across the country could face devastating budget shortfalls affecting public safety, education, infrastructure and other local government functions that all Americans rely on.

This week, county officials from across the nation will go to Capitol Hill to advocate for the PILT program. Many more county officials are engaging in grassroots advocacy efforts in their home counties in support of this critical program.

The National Association of Counties is urging members of Congress to support a full investment in the PILT program in FY 2016 and permanent funding for the future.

For the millions of people who enjoy America’s immense public lands, the case is clear. Without PILT, maintaining infrastructure in order to accommodate millions of visitors to public lands each year, notably in this record-setting 2015 — and many other important services — would not be possible.