

Truth and Some Consequences

by Jon Spunaugle

Secure Rural Schools Land Sales Initiative

("SRS") So you ask, "What does "SRS" have to do with rock collecting?" The simple answer is, up to now, nothing. "SRS" is a federal program that comes out of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Act of 2000. However,

recent proposals to sell a limited number of land parcels of public land using "SRS", could affect public access to these parcels which could contain collecting sites. On the other hand fossil collectors might rejoice if such a sale would open the door for vertebrate fossil collecting on any lands sold. The SRS program was adopted to try to help rural communities with the loss of tax revenue due to the decline in logging and other resource extraction from federal lands. The nations small rural communities

which have a large percentage of federal lands within their borders do not have as great a tax base as other areas do. When reduced resource extraction

and logging activities curtail tax collections further, these communities have difficulty funding even basic educational needs and infrastructure. The Secure Rural Schools and Communities Act of 2000 (Public Law 106-393) was enacted to provide transitional

assistance to rural counties that had been affected by the decline in their share of revenues from timber harvesting due to federal curtailment of these activities. SRS is a needed program for these rural counties. In the Fiscal year 2007 Federal Budget proposal, the administration is proposing that some of the Federal Lands in these areas be sold to add funding

for this program. The logic being that it would bring in both the sale proceeds to the communities and turn over the land to private owners who would pay some annual local tax on the property sold. The lands proposed for sale would be largely those small parcels that are not adjacent to the larger national forest and national resource areas. Sort of small islands of land close to, but not directly attached to, existing larger federal land parcels. The land would undoubtedly be purchased by ranchers interested in grazing, mining companies, and perhaps a few developers. The federal government would lower Chair agency costs associated with these same isolated land parcels. Also at issue is the lack of current public access to some of these parcels that are now surrounded by private land whose owners prohibit crossing their land to access the isolated public land parcel. This is a complicated issue.

It is very difficult to pinpoint where rock collecting interests might be affected. It will take local "rockhounds" who are familiar with the areas in question to determine if collecting will be impacted. Information on this proposal and some of the lands affected was published in the Federal Register on February 28, 2006. In this notice, the Forest Service indicated that 304,370 acres were proposed to be

offered for sale in 35 states. Lands already protected in Wilderness, Scenic River, National Trails, National Recreation Areas, Monuments and Historic sites, and other preserved areas including National Parks, are not included in the list of possible sale locations.

Public input and comments are being solicited by the U.S. Forest Service until March 30, 2006. Congress would have to approve an amendment to the "SRS Act" being proposed by the administration, for any sales to be processed. Comments can be submitted by mail, e-mail, fax. We'll keep you posted on any developments. Information can also be found on the internet at <www.fs.fed.us/land/staff/rural>. Thanks to Howell Whiting for his "heads up" on this issue.

America the Beautiful Pass -

Nothing from my sources indicate any movement, comment opportunities, or information on this national land access pass in the last two months. The best source for answering questions can be found on the internet at <www.doi.gov/initiatives/ImplementationFAQ.pdf>.

We'll continue to watch for anything new.

Wilderness land designations -

Congress is considering numerous Wilderness designations in various States and but has passed into law only two new 10,000+ acre areas. One is in Puerto Rico, and the other in the State of New Mexico.

The Fossil Bill -

It remains bottled up in the U.S. House of Representatives, Natural Resource Committee.

LASTLY, if you are aware of any hobby problems in the area of my Committee's responsibility that I have not written about, I would appreciate an e-mail at <jonspe@juno.com> or a phone call at (360) 835-9313 to alert me.

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