



FARM CREDIT COUNCIL



Rural Telephone Finance Cooperative



March 14, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairwoman, Senate Committee on Agriculture  
328(A) Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Boozman  
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Agriculture  
328(A) Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Glenn "GT" Thompson  
Chairman, House Committee on Agriculture  
1301 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable David Scott  
Ranking Member, House Committee on Agriculture  
1301 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Better Broadband Objectives in the Next Farm Bill

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Boozman, and Ranking Member Scott:

The stakeholders below represent a broad cross-section of entities with a vested interest in the vitality and long-term viability of rural America. From producing food to sustain the nation to providing critical connectivity and energy for rural communities, and from educating rural students to caring for the medical needs of rural residents, the organizations below and members of them play a critical role in powering the American economy and ensuring that rural areas thrive.

Against this backdrop, we welcome and appreciate the Agriculture Committees' focus on the upcoming Agriculture Improvement Act ("Farm Bill") reauthorization generally and more specifically on potential reforms to or refinements of rural broadband programs administered by the United States Department of Agriculture ("USDA"). We write today to underscore the need as part of the Farm Bill to aim for levels of connectivity in USDA programs that will meet the needs of rural Americans not just today but well into the future. Sound and fiscally responsible policy dictates investing in infrastructure that is built to last and, as representatives of rural communities, we believe it is essential that rural residents, businesses, and anchor institutions have access to the same robust and affordable connectivity enjoyed by urban dwellers. Unfortunately, some Americans are still left behind by a lack of service or broadband service that does not meet the needs of modern farms, ranches, homes, small businesses, school, libraries, and hospitals. While broadband has value universally, it is especially important for rural Americans who, because of the long distances needed to travel, often rely even more than their urban counterparts on online access.

USDA telecommunications programs generally, and the ReConnect Loan and Grant Program more specifically, have been vital to connecting rural Americans for many years. In just the first three rounds of ReConnect, USDA has invested more than \$3.1 billion in broadband infrastructure deployment. Indeed, notwithstanding high program expectations for service performance and network capability, funding demands in every round of ReConnect thus far have far outpaced the amounts made available – including the most recent third round in which applicants were required to deploy networks capable of delivering at least 100 Mbps symmetrical service. The overwhelming demand for ReConnect funding even as applicants have been expected to perform at high levels proves that setting a high standard for network and service capabilities does not deter applicants whatsoever, but rather demonstrates a surplus of interest by providers willing and able to deliver better broadband in rural America that will rival what is available to urban users.

For these reasons, we encourage you to continue to put the interests of rural communities first by codifying in the Farm Bill a minimum service level commitment of 100 Mbps symmetrical broadband service – the level specified in the oversubscribed third round of ReConnect – for any applicant seeking funding through ReConnect. By contrast, employing a lesser standard would represent an inefficient step backwards, flying in the face of the substantial demand demonstrated in the most recent round of ReConnect and failing the rural communities that need broadband capable of keeping pace with user demand for decades to come. Policies that encourage sustainable networks that meet the needs of consumers now and into the future will be most efficient in responding to consumer demand over the lives of those networks, particularly when compared to short-term solutions that are likely to be quickly outpaced by technological evolution and consumer demands and require substantial re-investment relatively soon thereafter.

We thank you for your time and consideration of our views on this important initiative for rural Americans. We look forward to working with you on ensuring that the Farm Bill makes a meaningful difference for Americans in rural and urban areas alike.

Sincerely,

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association  
National Rural Electric Cooperative Association  
Fiber Broadband Association  
National Association of Counties  
National Association of Development Organizations  
National Rural Health Association  
National Rural Economic Developers Association  
The Power and Communication Contractors Association  
National Rural Education Association  
Rural Community College Alliance  
National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative

Farm Credit Council  
CoBank  
National Cooperative Business Association  
National Utility Contractors Association  
Rural Telephone Finance Cooperative

cc. Chair and Ranking Member of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture,  
Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

cc. Chair and Ranking Member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture,  
Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration