

**Before the  
Federal Communications Commission  
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of )  
 )  
Establishing a 5G Fund for Rural America ) GN Docket No. 20-32

**REPLY OF  
NTCA–THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION**

NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association (“NTCA”)<sup>1</sup> hereby submits this reply to filings made in response to petitions for reconsideration<sup>2</sup> filed by the Rural Wireless Association, Inc. (“RWA”) and the Coalition of Rural Wireless Carriers (“CRWC”) (hereinafter “Petitioners”) in the above-captioned Federal Communications Commission (“Commission”) proceeding. Petitioners seek reconsideration of portions of the Commission’s Second Report and Order implementing the 5G Fund for Rural America.<sup>3</sup> As discussed further below, Petitioners properly seek deferral of the 5G Fund auction until after Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (“BEAD”) program awards have been made. In addition, Petitioners demonstrate the need for greater thought and analysis with respect to translating coverage depicted on the National Broadband Map (“NBM”) for use in universal service funding decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> NTCA is an industry association composed of approximately 850 community-based companies and cooperatives that provide advanced communications services in rural America and more than 400 other firms that support or themselves are engaged in the provision of such services.

<sup>2</sup> Petition for Reconsideration of the Rural Wireless Association, Inc., GN Docket No. 20-32, (fil. Jan. 10, 2025) (“RWA Petition”); Petition for Reconsideration of Coalition of Rural Wireless Carriers, GN Docket No. 20-32 (Jan. 13, 2025) (“CRWC Petition”).

<sup>3</sup> *Establishing a 5G Fund for Rural America*, GN Docket No. 20-32, Second Report and Order, Order on Reconsideration, and Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, FCC 24-89 (rel. Aug. 29, 2024) (“*5G Fund Second Report and Order*”).

**I. DEFERRAL OF THE 5G FUND ACTION UNTIL SUCH TIME AS BEAD PROGRAM AWARDS ARE MADE IS PRUDENT AND APPROPRIATE.**

NTCA agrees with Petitioners that the Commission should defer the 5G Fund reverse auction until after BEAD program awards have been issued.<sup>4</sup> As an initial matter, there is a limited budget for the 5G Fund, and the Commission has an obligation to use universal service dollars on a targeted and efficient basis. Although the Commission correctly noted in the *5G Fund Second Report and Order* that BEAD and the 5G Fund serve different purposes,<sup>5</sup> the investments made through BEAD will affect the availability and costs of 5G wireless deployments in certain areas. As T-Mobile states in support of Petitioners, “BEAD and related programs are poised to reshape the nation’s wireless infrastructure landscape and thereby directly affect the costs and viability of 5G deployment in rural areas.”<sup>6</sup> Then-Commissioner Carr stressed this precise point in his dissent, stating that, “BEAD funds will support fiber backhaul, fixed wireless, and other infrastructure projects that are part and parcel of a mobile broadband network. Wireless carriers can stretch each 5G Fund dollar further – and rationally commit to offer mobile broadband service for less money – if they know where these BEAD funds are flowing, for what technology, and to what ISP.”<sup>7</sup> Delaying the auction as Petitioners request will permit the Commission to leverage BEAD deployments *to lower the cost of mobile deployment and more surgically target 5G funds to areas that need them for additional investment and/or to assist in supporting the costs of ongoing operations.*

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<sup>4</sup> RWA Petition, pp. 11-13; CRWC, pp. 3-4. *See also* Comments of T-Mobile, GN Docket No. 20-32 (fil. Mar. 31, 2025), pp. 2-5.

<sup>5</sup> *5G Fund Second Report and Order*, ¶ 76.

<sup>6</sup> T-Mobile, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *5G Fund Second Report and Order*, Carr, Brendan, Dissenting Statement.

RWA observes that the recommendation to coordinate BEAD and the 5G Fund was supported by the underlying record, with several parties advocating for delay of the 5G auction until after BEAD awards are made.<sup>8</sup> As then-Commissioner Carr stated in his dissent, this “cart before the horse,” approach will “lead to the same types of problems that have plagued . . . other broadband funding initiatives: more overbuilding, more duplication, and less efficient use of taxpayer dollars.”<sup>9</sup> NTCA agrees that the savings realized by delaying the 5G Fund auction until the BEAD awards have been announced by all states and territories could be significant and will almost certainly have an impact on the allocation of the 5G Fund. The Commission should reconsider its decision to move forward with the 5G Fund auction prior to the award of BEAD funding.

## **II. THE PETITIONS HIGHLIGHT THE NEED FOR GREATER THOUGHT AND ANALYSIS IN TRANSLATING COVERAGE DEPICTED ON THE NATIONAL BROADBAND MAP FOR USE IN UNIVERSAL SERVICE FUNDING DECISIONS.**

Petitioners highlight another important consideration with respect to the 5G Fund, specifically how the NBM will factor into determining where to direct this funding. The accuracy of the map continues to be undermined by a challenge process that is for many reasons not properly calibrated to reveal and correct misstated coverage. As RWA states, crowdsourced data that is a fundamental part of the mobile challenge process is ineffective in terms of revealing overstated coverage: “[W]idespread crowdsourced data cannot be performed in sparsely populated areas because there is an insufficient number of data samples to collect to create a cognizable challenge (e.g., there is less than one person per square mile in these rural and remote

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<sup>8</sup> RWA, Petition, p. 11, citing *5G Fund Second Report and Order*, ¶ 71, fn. 251.

<sup>9</sup> *5G Fund Second Report and Order*, Carr, Brendan, Dissenting Statement.

areas).”<sup>10</sup> CRWC further notes that the process is hampered by the fact that the Commission’s “testing app requires participants to divulge personal information to the government, something many Americans will resist.”<sup>11</sup> Most critically, data cited by RWA and CRWC call into question whether the mobile challenge process has produced any measurable improvement in the NBM; as RWA states “out of 270,000 individual mobile challenges and mobile crowdsourced speed data submissions, 175 cognizable mobile challenges have been sent to mobile providers in a two year period.”<sup>12</sup>

Speaking more broadly, as NTCA has repeatedly discussed,<sup>13</sup> these issues highlight yet again how the NBM must be seen as informative but not dispositive in making universal service funding decisions. While the NBM offers a useful starting point for identifying where a competitor might be able to fulfill the mission of universal service without support or subsidy, the NBM is not in fact built for this purpose. It offers a depiction of any given location or area to which a provider might be able to deliver service, but it does not establish that the provider can in fact serve every location or customer in that area. Thus, as helpful as the NBM may be in undertaking such an analysis, it is not designed to serve as the *sole* criterion by which to make such decisions.

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<sup>10</sup> RWA Petition, p. 2, quoting Letter from Carri Bennet, General Counsel, Rural Wireless Association, to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, FCC, GN Docket No. 20-32 (fil. Aug. 26, 2024), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> CRWC Petition, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> RWA Petition, p. 4. *See also* CRWC Petition, p. 5 (“Early last year, CRWC filed comments in the Digital Opportunity Data Collection docket explaining, among other things, that the mobile availability challenge process has produced only 35 cognizable challenges and 18 corrections to the map, not a single one resulting from a bulk availability challenge.”), citing, Comments of Coalition of Rural Wireless Carriers, WC Docket Nos. 19-195 and 11-10 (fil. Feb. 19, 2024), pp. 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Comments of NTCA, WC Docket Nos. 19-195, 11-10 (fil. Oct. 4, 2024) (“*Oct 24 NTCA comments*”), pp. 3-9; *Ex Parte* Letter from Michael R. Romano, Executive Vice President, NTCA, to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, Commission, WC Docket Nos. 19-195, et al. (fil. May 17, 2024).

The instant petitions highlight yet again the need for the Commission to take a fresh look at how it develops the map, how challenges to the map are handled, and how it uses the map. Even as the NBM represents a significant step forward from prior measures of availability, and even as it has improved over time, good government and public policy should prompt a periodic evaluation of how it can be made more effective and efficient through improved processes and systems. For example, a lack of meaningful reporting standards means that “while an ISP may report that it can serve any single location in a given area, the BDC does not capture – and the National Broadband Map therefore does not reflect – whether the ISP is in fact capable of serving every location in that same area.”<sup>14</sup> This in turn prompts more challenges than would otherwise be needed, even as critical data is often unavailable for the Commission and would-be challengers to verify availability submissions,<sup>15</sup> and challengers cannot turn to speed test data as part of the bulk availability challenge process.<sup>16</sup>

Taken more broadly, the petitions highlight a very real need for a methodology by which availability as depicted on the NBM should be “translated” for use in universal service funding decisions. Blind reliance on the NBM without further thought or analysis for any universal service funding decisions, fixed or mobile, should be avoided as the map is simply not built for that purpose. NTCA has offered a methodology for translating the NBM for funding decisions in the high-cost Universal Service Fund competitive overlap context,<sup>17</sup> and urges the Commission to recognize that a similar approach is needed for its 5G fund as well.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ex Parte* Letter from Michael R. Romano, Executive Vice President, NTCA, to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, Commission, WC Docket Nos. 10-90, et al. (fil. Nov. 7, 2024), attachment p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Oct 24 NTCA comments*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> *See* FN 14, *infra*.

Respectfully submitted,



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