



**WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

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**ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

**HEARING TITLED, "A 2022 REVIEW OF THE FARM BILL: BROADBAND" BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE  
AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**SEPTEMBER 15, 2022**

Chair Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the importance of broadband and high-speed internet connectivity in our rural communities, and the role of county governments in helping to connect our most unserved and underserved residents across the country.

My name is Tarryl Clark and I serve as the First District Commissioner in Stearns County, Minnesota and Chair of the National Association of Counties Telecommunications and Technology Policy Steering Committee. Stearns County is home to approximately 160,000 residents who rely daily on the availability of high-speed internet to connect to remote work, education and telehealth services. Across our county, we boast a community whose backbone is the work of our rural communities and farmers, who depend on high-speed internet for uses as wide ranging as precision agriculture to modern participation in online commerce. Yet as demonstrated most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing a connectivity gap that has left our rural residents out of reach from high-speed internet infrastructure and critical services. This lack of reliable broadband is a major economic barrier and an issue of socioeconomic equality.

Counties play a major role in broadband deployment efforts within our communities. We serve key roles as partners, funders, policymakers, data aggregators, and conveners for promoting high-speed internet access and broadband deployment across our community. As partners and funders, counties work to connect our residents to high-speed internet services through strong public-private partnerships and the utilization of federal grant opportunities. We rely on a system of intergovernmental coordination with our federal and state counterparts to achieve the collective mission of closing the digital divide.

As a testament to this role, and through the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and implementation of the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (Recovery Fund), counties have invested direct funds into critical broadband infrastructure and services through the ARPA Recovery Fund. Counties have also directly addressed issues of internet affordability and the “homework gap,” through direct aid and support for our residents ranging from public Wi-Fi and hotspots to outreach efforts that support expanded collaboration with community anchor institutions.

Counties also play a critical role as policymakers of broadband deployment within our jurisdictions. As stewards of public rights-of-way and other public property access points, counties work together with internet service providers on a regular basis to streamline broadband deployment and access for our residents, while retaining local authority for public assets that are held in trust to benefit the local community. Counties support smart policies such as “dig once” and “future-proofing” broadband infrastructure and deployment efforts to ensure that our residents have access to ongoing and reliable high-speed internet services.

Finally, counties serve as data aggregators and conveners in broadband deployment efforts. Counties across the country have engaged in efforts to collect quantitative and qualitative data at the local level to determine the true state of connectivity and demonstrate community need for investments in high-speed internet connectivity. We also convene public partners and community stakeholders on a regular basis.

The role of broadband in rural communities today cannot be overstated. In fact, “broadbandification” of the country can be seen as very similar to the rural electrification movement of the 20th century, where the federal government played a critical role in serving our rural communities when the economic incentive to extend the grid was not present. There is a large opportunity for intergovernmental partnerships and coordination to continue with the different USDA broadband programs currently under review ahead of the 2023 Farm Bill.

As Congress begins negotiations around the 2023 Farm Bill, counties urge lawmakers to include provisions that will continue to advance our shared goals of closing the digital divide across America and providing rural communities with the resources they need to be resilient and future-ready in the 21st century. America's counties agree on the following recommendations:

- **COVID-19 exacerbated the already dire digital divide in rural America, and counties urge Congress to continue to fund broadband deployment geared specifically to rural communities.**
- **The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) is offering vital resources to ensure access to high-speed internet to local governments. However, a continued focus on broadband infrastructure grant programs that are accessible, flexible, and respectful of local decision-making authority is needed.**
- **To ensure we meet our collective goal of 100 percent connectivity across rural America, counties support a stronger federal-state-local framework.**

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Our lives and futures have become inextricably tied to technology. Without access to high-speed internet, many of our rural and underserved communities are becoming increasingly isolated and left behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the digital divide in our country for rural communities, who are at a particular disadvantage in receiving adequate broadband service due to their remote location and lower population density. For these rural communities, broadband can serve as a lifeline, connecting students to online degrees and connecting sick patients to medical consultations locally unavailable.

Congress made historic investments into America's counties with the passage of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). Combined, both vital pieces of legislation have bestowed counties with the flexibility to invest in infrastructure networks targeted toward unserved and underserved households across the country. Counties have a large role to play in helping to steward these federal resources and ensuring local communities receive access to high-speed and reliable internet service.

As these historic federal investments show, the need for federal support for broadband investments in our unconnected and rural communities continue to be a top priority for America's counties. Both ARPA and BIL are offering vital resources in the form of direct fiscal aid to local governments. However, coupled with provisions in the Farm Bill, specifically resources through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's ReConnect Program, counties have been able to take major and necessary steps to close the digital divide. Counties urge that the focus on rural connectivity in the current Farm Bill be carried over into the 2023 iteration to support our continued efforts in broadband infrastructure.

**The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) is offering vital resources to ensure access to high-speed internet to local governments. However, a continued focus on broadband infrastructure grant programs that are accessible, flexible and respectful of local decision-making authority is needed.**

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) is currently offering the nation an unparalleled opportunity to close the digital divide and provide accessible and affordable internet access for all rural Americans. The BIL's devotion of \$65 billion towards broadband deployment, digital equity and internet affordability initiatives provides the opportunity for well-guided federal dollars to reach every unserved and underserved community across the

country.

Counties are actively executing the mission of BIL's broadband goals by working with our state partners to implement the Broadband Equity, Affordability, and Deployment (BEAD) program, promote the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) to eligible households and communities within our jurisdictions, and developing digital equity plans in coordination with states to ensure our communities have the digital skills and support needed to thrive in a 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

As we continue to focus on connecting our rural communities to high-speed internet, the Farm Bill's existing broadband infrastructure programs stand as significant opportunities to close the digital divide. Specifically, in our experience when implementing these federal programs related to broadband, counties offer the following recommendations:

- **Streamlined application processes:** To ensure that rural communities can and will participate in broadband infrastructure grant programs, a streamlined application process is needed. Counties play a large role in helping local providers apply for federal dollars, and the Farm Bill can continue to support rural communities by providing as many on-the-ground resources as possible to support grant applications and streamline application requirements while ensuring projects meet the goals of delivering high-speed internet service.
- **Prioritizing high-speed internet:** To best meet the needs of rural residents, federal programs should encourage broadband deployment projects that offer technological solutions that best fit a community's needs, while also prioritizing projects that promise the most reliable and high-speed service. This balance will ensure that communities retain the utmost flexibility to utilize the technologies that best meet the geographic and topological conditions of a particular community while ensuring that all broadband projects provide reliable and ongoing service that sufficiently constitutes high-speed internet.
- **Prioritizing communities with minimal access to broadband services:** Counties support federal funding being allocated to areas with no broadband infrastructure, including areas that do not currently have projects with final approval to use federal dollars to deploy broadband infrastructure that meets the minimum definition of high-speed internet. Our rural communities cannot miss this palpable moment to connect every unserved resident to high-speed internet that will be accessible and affordable for the foreseeable future.
- **Leveraging local expertise and resources:** Using local tools, such as community broadband mapping, can play a large role in helping our federal partners identify where broadband is most needed. This unique data will help shed light on the true state of connectivity across the country, especially in rural regions. Counties, along with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), will be able to adequately adopt the new national standard and utilize these findings to address our nation's connectivity issues.

**To ensure we meet our collective goal of 100 percent connectivity across rural America, counties support a stronger federal-state-local framework.**

As important partners in the intergovernmental process, county leaders are most interested in serving in all capacities necessary to help close the ongoing digital divide in our rural communities. Counties that represent our rural residents recognize acutely that the ongoing divide leads to an unacceptable outcome for rural

Americans, and the Farm Bill offers a unique opportunity to bring broadband infrastructure into focus for our rural communities.

As prudent stewards of federal dollars and diligent collaborators with internet service providers, counties can help play a central role in the implementation of federal broadband programs geared towards rural America.

This work to close the digital divide in counties across the country is ongoing and is truly a joint goal among federal, state and local partners. For example, in my state of Minnesota, we have developed our Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant Program initiative, which prioritizes high-speed internet services for our most unserved communities across the state. This state initiative requires robust coordination with local government partners to ensure we are meeting our residents' needs.

Another example of this intergovernmental partnership is with the authorization of ARPA. In Stearns County, we have dedicated over \$16 million to connect our residents to broadband that will ultimately provide fiber-to-the-premises to almost every household in our county. This project will ultimately require leveraging the efforts and funds from every township within our jurisdiction as well as ready-and-willing internet service providers in our county to drive this project to completion.

These are just two examples of how the intergovernmental partnership is critical in solving the technology divide in our nation. As important ground-level partners in our nation's intergovernmental system, counties can deploy the resources needed to make meaningful progress on rural broadband expansion, with a strategic focus on supporting rural communities.

### **Conclusion**

Chair Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.

Counties recognize that today, reliable, fast and affordable high-speed internet is a fundamental part of ensuring our residents can achieve healthy, safe and fulfilled lives.

We appreciate the efforts that have been brought forward thus far to address the current lack of connectivity in our rural communities and look forward to working with you to achieve our shared goal of closing the nation's digital divide.