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Introduction

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Thompson, and other distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Lynn Follansbee and I am Vice President, Strategic Initiatives and Partnerships for USTelecom, the national trade association representing network providers, technology innovators, suppliers and manufacturers committed to connecting the world through the power of broadband. Our diverse membership ranges from large publicly traded communications corporations to local and regional companies and cooperatives – all providing advanced communications services to urban and rural communities and everywhere in between.

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly illustrated that high-speed broadband is a cornerstone of American life, connecting people to education, healthcare, employment and virtually every aspect of our daily lives while ensuring our nation's economic security. USTelecom members actively participate in all federal programs that support the deployment of broadband, including the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) Rural eConnectivity (ReConnect) Program. And under the current contributions system, our members provide a significant portion of the funds for the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Universal Service Fund (USF) programs. USTelecom welcomes the opportunity to provide thoughts on how interagency coordination can best foster efficient use of all broadband deployment funding while maximizing governmental efforts to close the digital divide. We also appreciate the chance to offer some suggestions for improvement to the ReConnect program itself.

We applaud the Committee for holding today's hearing. This is an important discussion as we look closely at how items adopted as part of the 2018 Farm Bill have impacted the deployment of rural broadband. It is also important to review how the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) works with other federal agencies toward achieving one of our nation's top priorities - closing the digital divide. Addressing challenges related to the deployment of broadband infrastructure is critical to connecting all communities, especially in rural areas.

Interagency Coordination is a Necessity

USTelecom and its members strongly support the cross-agency effort to ensure that all Americans have access to high-speed broadband, and agree that coordination of all federal agencies' programs is crucial to achieving this goal.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act programs provide a significant amount of money for broadband deployment and there is a clear need for close coordination across all agencies involved. To ensure the best use of these critical funds, USTelecom recommends that policymakers require early reporting by states that administer broadband funding programs, particularly those funded by NTIA. This information on the areas that will be served by the funded projects will help avoid duplication or overbuilding and should be included in the FCC's Broadband Data Collection ("BDC") maps.

In adopting the Broadband DATA Act, Congress expressed a clear intent to ensure there is good data showing where there is service and where there is not—not only to close the digital divide, but also to ensure that scarce government resources are not spent on overbuilding. The recent agreement between the FCC, NTIA and USDA further advances this objective by requiring those agencies to share information about broadband availability and "consider basing the distribution of funds for broadband deployment … on standardized data regarding broadband coverage."[1] As we move forward to fully connect the nation, it is essential that all federal and state agencies that support broadband deployment initiatives should align goals and rely on the BDC maps.

Unfortunately, RUS has not always included FCC deployment data when making grants under the ReConnect program which has led to some wasteful overbuilding. With the Broadband Data Collection maps nearly completed, we are on the verge of having much more accurate data to guide these critical government investments. USTelecom urges the USDA, and all other agencies distributing funding, to prioritize policies that ensure government resources are coordinated and targeted to avoid spending funds on the same project.

USDA and other agencies must also align on the current definition of broadband. Having different deployment programs utilizing different speed minimums creates an inconsistent standard for broadband deployment. Finally, to further support a coordinated effort to connect all Americans, USDA must work directly with all federal agencies administering broadband funding to ensure consistent requirements related to supply chains for broadband equipment across all programs, including the application of Buy America requirements.

The ReConnect Program Should Be Improved

All state and federal government broadband programs, including ReConnect, should narrowly direct resources to those communities that the BDC maps identify as having no service. Ensuring precious broadband funding is not wasted on overlapping projects is the only way we can reach 100 percent connectivity. Specifically, RUS should create clearer processes for both its applications and coverage challenges so there is greater transparency. Often, the results of coverage challenges are vague, or never made known at all, leaving providers wondering whether to proceed with a new build or upgrade to an existing network.

Additionally, despite some changes, there continue to be rules in place that limit participation by some applicants. For example, USDA's current rules require the grant to be superior to all other liens affecting the collateral. USTelecom urges RUS to consider alternatives, such as a letter of credit in the event there are liens on the underlying property or portions thereof. Such a change would enable more carriers to participate, particularly larger companies who serve the most rural and remote customers in the nation. Likewise, Section 7.4 of the RUS Grant Agreement does not allow an awardee to make distributions without RUS's consent while it is receiving grant funds. This appears to prohibit public companies from making distributions to its shareholders, thereby potentially limiting the company's ability to exercise its usual business practices and/or meet obligations to its shareholders. RUS should either clarify that this is not the case or change its rules to allow publicly held companies to participate.

Although the ReConnect program has admittedly evolved and had multiple successful rounds of its grant program, curiously ReConnect is still operating as a "pilot" program. In the upcoming Farm Bill, Congress should consider whether it intends to formalize the program and, if so, consider the program's current role in conjunction with available funds at other federal agencies.

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[1] 47 U.S.C. § 1308(b)(3).

Precision Agriculture Task Force

I also have the privilege of serving as Vice Chair of the Mapping Working Group for the FCC's Precision Ag Task Force which provides advice and recommendations to the FCC and USDA on how to assess and advance deployment of broadband on unserved and underserved agricultural land. The Task Force's working groups focus in greater detail on specific issues related to Precision Agriculture, including Accelerating Broadband Deployment on Unserved Agricultural Lands; Mapping and Analyzing Connectivity on Agricultural Lands; Examining Current and Future Connectivity Demand for Precision Agriculture; and Encouraging Adoption of Precision Agriculture and Availability of High-Quality Jobs on Connected Farms. Each of these working groups has done extensive research and developed recommendations that address current challenges.

I applaud this Committee for its role in the creation of the Precision Ag Task Force as part of the 2018 Farm Bill. The Task Force is in its second two year term and has already made excellent recommendations to the Commission which will no doubt have an impact on the advancement of Precision Agriculture which helps farmers have more successful crops that ultimately feed all of our families.

The report adopted by the Task Force in its first term had recommendations to:
- Improve federal broadband maps and consistently validate user experiences by building on the FCC's Broadband Data Collection effort to combine it with existing agricultural maps such as the NASS Cultivated Land data should be used to determine the base map extent for determining Cultivated Land area for the continental US to reveal for farmers where there is both fixed and mobile providers serving the agricultural and rural domains, including Native American agricultural lands;
- Increase incentives and subsidies at the local and national level to substantially increased to drive deployment of connectivity, with an overarching goal of deploying future-proof networks and enable Precision Agriculture deployment in to new areas of technology;
- Enhance both download and upload high-speed standards to meet the technology needs in agriculture and identify, implement, and/or strengthen policies to facilitate use of low, mid, and high-band spectrum for Precision Agriculture applications;
- Improve collaboration between federal agencies and remove regulatory impediments to implement a common set of performance targets and standards that reflect the specific needs of Precision Agriculture, including build-out requirements for croplands and ranch lands. Multiple performance targets tailored for specific Precision Agriculture use cases – specifically USDA, NASS, Farm Service Agency (FSA), Risk Management Agency (RMA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and other agencies should align their existing and individual file management systems to have the capability to receive electronic data layers that are commonly created through the normal course of farm operations.
- Increase digital access to education and training for individuals engaged in farming to meet the increased demand for skilled workers that will result from the continuing adoption of Precision Agriculture; and,
- Place a priority on developing Precision Agriculture cyber security specialists by the USDA, and Department of Homeland Security in recognition that agriculture is critical and essential infrastructure and malicious acts should be treated accordingly.

These thoughtful and detailed recommendations reflect only a sliver of the hard work volunteer members of the Task Force are doing on a weekly basis to bring technology to crop lands and ranches to enhance the success of American agriculture workers.

Conclusion

The challenges associated with rural broadband connectivity require an enduring private and public sector commitment and partnership. Thank you for holding this hearing today and for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you today. USTelecom and our members stand ready to work with the Committee, Congress, and the Administration to connect all communities and, once and for all, close the digital divide.