

Rep. Pat Fallon, TX-04

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Fortenberry, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss pressing needs for our farmers, ranchers, and rural Americans. My name is Pat Fallon and I have the distinct privilege of representing Texas's fourth congressional district.

I ask the committee to consider the following:

Circuit Rider Technical Assistance Program

Access to clean and safe water is a necessity for all Americans. However, providing clean and safe water requires individuals who are able to train others in how to correctly access clean and safe water.

Texas-04 is home to 92 member water utilities, which directly serves 376,197 constituents in our district. That is approximately 50% of our district. Circuit Riders provide hands-on training to non-profit water supply corporations, water districts and small cities on all aspects of operations, management, compliance, and rates. They also assist utilities with evaluating alternative technological solutions and recommend operational improvements. Circuit Riders support small systems impacted by natural disasters and other emergencies by bringing generators and equipment to help get these systems back up and running.

I am requesting the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture provide a funding increase for the USDA's Circuit Rider program at 3% more than the \$20,157,000 appropriated in FY2021. Providing this funding will maintain the 132 full time Circuit Rider employees, and will cover increased travel, benefits, and other inflationary costs.

Rural Broadband

The COVID-19 pandemic brought heightened awareness to our need and dependence upon the internet. With schools and businesses closed, Americans became more dependent on the internet to educate our children, for virtual medical office visits, to carry out banking activities—to name a few. We quickly realized that large swaths of America and indeed in Texas-04, lacked access to the internet. Many communities continue to lack internet service meeting the FCC's minimum speed standard for broadband – 25 megabits per second for downloads and 3 megabits per second for uploads. In TX-04 that includes Hunt, Camp, Fannin, Delta, and Rains counties. It is estimated that 22% of Americans in rural areas lack access to these fixed terrestrial speeds, compared to only 1.5% of Americans in urban areas.

I am requesting the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture provide robust funding for the USDA's ReConnect program building off the \$635 million appropriated in FY2021. Additionally, I request \$350 million for the rural broadband loan and grant program authorized by the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (the 2018 Farm Bill). Investing in these programs and providing direction that will expand eligibility to areas that still lack basic broadband service, will provide a meaningful down-payment in our rural communities and their economies at a time when it is most needed.

Additionally, I respectfully request the Committee include language urging the Rural Utility Service (RUS) to expand ReConnect eligibility to provide funding to areas without access to internet speeds that meet or exceeds the 25/3 Mbps standard consistent with the 2018 Farm Bill. These programs must promote broad participation, technological neutrality, and transparency, to ultimately improve service, connect communities, and enhance accountability

for the funding. Further, the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) at USDA should be directed to expeditiously disburse such funds once grants and loans are awarded.

Grassroots Source Water Protection Program

The ability to protect our ground and surface water from pollution is extremely important in providing America with safe and clean water. There are 243 ground and surface water systems in Texas-04. Without source water protection specialists, we are not able to protect our ground and surface water. Investing in source water protection allows us to be proactive in prevention, by reducing point and nonpoint source pollutants before they pollute our water. These efforts are not only important in protecting the integrity of our water, but also extremely beneficial to our economy. The USDA estimates that soil erosion costs between \$2 billion to \$8 billion a year, and the EPA estimates that public water systems spent an additional \$200 million per year just to remove excess pollutants. By implementing this program, we are able to save time and money by proactively protecting our water sources.

Therefore, I am requesting the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture provide funding for the Farm Service Agency's Source Water Protection program, at the same level as appropriated in FY2021. Ensuring funding in this program allows us to prevent source water pollution, which provides Americans with safe and clean water, while saving them the cost of purifying polluted water.

Rural Utilities Services (RUS) Electric Loans

Our country cannot operate without electricity. Consumer-owned, not-for-profit electric cooperatives generate less than five percent of the nation's electric power, but maintain 42 percent of the nation's electric distribution lines, and cover 56 percent of the country's land

mass. These electric cooperatives use Rural Utilities Services (RUS) Electric Loans to finance their operations to provide electric service to around 42 million people a day. The RUS Electric Loans have a stellar repayment record, and the loans made in FY2019 netted \$219 million to the U.S. Treasury.

I am requesting the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture provide funding for the Rural Utilities Services (RUS) Electric Loans program, at the same level as appropriated in FY2021. The RUS Electric Loans allow these electric cooperatives to distribute affordable and reliable electricity to those they serve.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these requests.