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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Quigley, Ranking Member Womack, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify about lessons learned from efforts to deliver and sustain broadband in the face of the COVID-19 global pandemic. I am Lang Zimmerman, Vice President of Yelcot Telephone Company and Mountain View Telephone Company, which are small, rural broadband and voice providers located in North Central, AR. My remarks today are on behalf of Yelcot and Mountain View, as well as NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association, which represents approximately 850 rural community-based carriers that offer advanced communications services throughout the most sparsely-populated areas of the nation. These cooperatives and small commercial companies serve the most rural parts of the United States, reaching areas that contain less than five percent of the U.S. population, but which are spread across nearly 37 percent of the U.S. landmass. To give a further sense of the rural nature of this terrain, the average density of a NTCA member serving area is roughly seven subscribers per square mile.

Yelcot and Mountain View are community-based telecommunications providers with a combined 59 employees and 9,240 customers. Yelcot serves a 178 square mile area with an average of thirteen customers per square mile, while Mountain View serves a 636 square mile area with an average of nine customers per square mile. About 40% of Mountain View's customers are spread out over 450 square miles, for a population density in this more rural territory of five customers per square mile. We provide fixed broadband and voice to our customers with fiber-to-the-home technology and traditional copper-based facilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the essential nature of high-speed download *and* upload connectivity for every American, whether at work or at home. For years, NTCA members have seen that high-speed broadband facilitates so much more than just downstream applications like streaming video entertainment. Many Americans now likewise realize the importance of robust broadband in connecting with a doctor without traveling to the medical office or hospital and for students to continue their education even when the classroom is hundreds of miles away or just right down the street but closed. A high-capacity network capable of handling significant upload speeds is also critical for people to continue receiving paychecks by working remotely using secure and bandwidth-intensive virtual private networks, and better two-way capability and network performance allows us to maintain social interactions with friends, family, and other loved ones during these trying times.

Thanks in significant part to the hard work of this subcommittee and programs like the Universal Service Fund (USF) High-Cost Program overseen by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the financing programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), NTCA's smaller, community-based broadband providers were well-prepared to keep Americans connected during the pandemic through robust networks sized to meet future demand and a spirit of customer service that is second to none. But the work of connecting everyone to better broadband is not finished. Existing networks must be maintained and upgraded over time while ensuring rates are affordable for customers, and millions of Americans are unfortunately still waiting for a more reliable, high-speed broadband connection.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROVIDERS HELPING STRUGGLING CONSUMERS AND COMMUNITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered society as we know it. All of us understand that even as the numbers improve, Americans are undergoing a shift in the conduct of everyday lives and in many ways things will not return to "normal" as they were before the pandemic. Even as Americans go back to work, school, and shopping, numerous reports indicate that the "new normal" will include more significant engagement in distance education, telemedicine, online commerce, and telework. Demand for robust broadband will not decrease but will rather complement our collective return to a new and stronger "normal."

In light of this, I am proud to report that, as "hometown providers" based largely in the areas they serve, Yelcot, Mountain View, and other small, rural broadband providers demonstrated their rural community commitment in the face of the coronavirus pandemic through countless initiatives to ensure all customers remained connected to essential broadband service or were able to get connected if they were not before. Hundreds of the signers of FCC Chairman Pai's pledge to "Keep Americans Connected" were NTCA members – and in many cases, because of their hometown presence, these carriers went above and beyond the terms of the pledge to help their families, friends, and neighbors, and continued doing so long after the pledge expired last summer. These initiatives include maintaining connections to customers unable to pay due to the pandemic, deploying free hotspots in our communities, and donating equipment to local schools.

On average, NTCA members reported in the fall of 2020 that they had incurred over $80,000 in uncollectibles (unpaid accounts receivable) due to their refusal to cut off service to customers unable to pay over the past year. Some providers reported uncollectibles as high as $350,000 – an enormous sum for a small provider that still must pay both essential employees putting themselves at risk and suppliers for new routers and fiber to meet demand for new installations, all while larger national and regional network operators continue to expect payment for connections between rural markets and internet points of presence around the country.

One measure that would help smaller providers withstand these losses incurred in the interest of keeping essential broadband service in place is the *Keeping Critical Connections Act* (KCCA)[1], a Senate bill that would direct the FCC to create a temporary emergency fund for reimbursing small broadband providers when an operator: (1) provides households with students with free or discounted broadband or free upgrades to meet distance learning needs; or (2) keeps low-income customers connected who cannot pay their broadband bill due to the economic impact of the COVID-19 national emergency. The Emergency Broadband Benefit that Congress adopted in the *Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020* offers great promise to help consumers pay their bills going forward, and the Homeowner Assistance Fund adopted in the *American Rescue Plan Act of 2021* could help carriers recoup unpaid bills in some cases, but only the KCCA is designed to help these small providers that stepped up for their communities at a crucial time to ensure that everyone remained connected to the Internet. Congress should adopt the KCCA immediately.

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[1] S.608 - *Keeping Critical Connections Act of 2021* (Sen Klobuchar (D-MN)).

The good news is that, because of their interest in ensuring the best possible service for the rural communities they serve, NTCA members' networks have withstood the increased bandwidth demands brought on by shifting consumer and business usage. Broadband providers saw a 40% increase in broadband usage between the end of 2019 and 2020, and a recent report estimates that around 30% of the modern workforce could be working from home multiple days a week by as soon as the end of 2021, creating a permanent demand for higher speeds and upload capacity.[2] Thankfully, as NTCA's annual broadband survey confirms year after year, NTCA members lead the charge in rural broadband deployment, with the most recent report indicating that nearly two-thirds of their rural customers have access to fiber-to-the-premises connectivity and speeds in excess of 100 Mbps. Throughout the pandemic NTCA members reported that their networks performed as designed, without congestion or disruption despite unprecedented increases in demand.

In the end, whether by pledge or by DNA, because they so often live in the small towns and very rural areas they serve, NTCA members are simply focused on doing the right things by their customers and community. This means not only investing in the kinds of networks that will be there for years to come in these communities but focusing every day on the delivery of services in ways that are responsive to consumer demand and designed to address their evolving needs.

BROADBAND IS ESSENTIAL RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Much Progress…

It is by now well known that rural broadband has far-reaching effects for both urban and rural America, creating efficiencies in health care, education, agriculture, energy, and commerce, and enhancing the quality of life for citizens across the country. Yelcot and Mountain View provide fiber broadband service to every local school district and healthcare provider in our service area, as well as the statewide research network and numerous cell towers. In 2020, Yelcot activated internet service for 193 customer accounts for a 12% increase in internet customers and Mountain View saw 530 customers add internet service – a 14% increase. Between both companies, we were adding 3 new internet customers each business day, largely during the pandemic.

As we look to future data needs of our customers and our communities, we have taken aggressive steps to focus on the anticipated increase in usage. This puts our customers in a great position as data needs grow. Due to this demand, we continue to pursue fiber deployment as fast as possible, even as we also look to immediately employ new technology to increase the pace of bandwidth upgrades to our customers while we work to deliver even better "future proof" networks.

The pandemic has highlighted the need to continue these investments as demand for bandwidth increases as described above. Due to our investments in our networks, we had the capacity to meet that demand. These investments would not have been possible without the USDA Rural Utilities Service telecom programs. Since the early 1990s, the RUS telecom programs have financed advanced network plant at a net return for taxpayers while enabling deployment of state-of-the-art networks to rural Americans left behind by providers unable or unwilling to serve low-population-density markets. Today,

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[2] *See* BROADBAND TODAY: Rural America's Critical Connection, Foundation for Rural Service (March 2021).

with the funding Congress has appropriated to ReConnect, RUS is now able to make substantial grants to finance networks in areas that its other programs have not yet been able to reach.

In January 2020, Yelcot was awarded a $3.4 million ReConnect Program loan and grant to upgrade facilities with a fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) network that will connect 548 households in Baxter and Marion counties. Construction will be complete by the end of July. Mountain View Telephone has received two ReConnect awards to deploy fiber broadband in Stone County, Arkansas – a $3.7 million grant to upgrade facilities to a fiber network to connect 702 households, 15 pre-subscribed farms and a pre-subscribed business, and a second $2.9 million grant to deploy a fiber-to-the-premises network to connect 1,331 people, 39 farms, six businesses, two fire stations, and one post office to high-speed broadband internet. The former Mountain View project is about 40% finished with a projected completion date of April 2022, while the latter awaits RUS construction approval.

The speed and sustainability of broadband deployment, however, will depend upon not only reasonable access to capital to finance construction through programs such as ReConnect, but also the availability of ongoing support in many cases to help with operational expenses and make sure user rates on these rural networks, once upgraded, are not astronomical and unaffordable. RUS telecom loans and ongoing High Cost USF support have long worked in concert to help small carriers deploy the most advanced networks possible. While many focus on the upfront financing aspects of this debate – which are important, to be sure – it is equally important that we not overlook the long-term viability of networks in these sparsely populated rural areas and the kinds of support mechanisms needed to sustain them and keep services affordable on them. The USF program thus plays a distinct, but complementary, role to USDA and other financing programs in ensuring that customers not only gain access to networks but can make the most effective use of them over the lives of those networks.

This last point is one that is far too often overlooked and cannot be emphasized enough – the delivery of broadband involves not only the one-time act of deploying a network, but the ongoing challenges of delivering services and keeping pace with user demand over the decades that the network will be operational. There is a great deal of understandable focus on the challenges associated with connecting every American to broadband in the first instance – and companies like Yelcot and Mountain View are front and center in this effort – but it cannot be lost that we need to take steps as well to make sure that these networks remain sustainable and that the services offered atop them remain affordable and relevant to customers for years to come.

…but Much More Work to Do

Despite the progress in deployment discussed above and the importance of making sure to sustain networks and services, the simple and unfortunate fact is that many parts of rural America still need better connectivity in the first instance. Although the data show that there has been no sector of the telecom industry more aggressive in advancing rural broadband at the highest levels of capacity, a small portion of the customers of NTCA members still lack access to sufficient broadband. And many more customers sit without sufficient connectivity in areas historically served by larger providers that are not based in those rural communities. In a country where many urban consumers and businesses benefit from 100 Mbps or Gigabit speeds, broadband access in too many parts of rural America lag behind

urban areas, with availability and affordability being persistent challenges despite the best efforts, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit of NTCA's members.

Why is rural broadband so hard? The primary challenge is one of making a business case for an investment in the first place. It does no good to build a network if the provider cannot afford to operate it and repay the capital used to construct it – and even the very best network is certainly of little use if no one can afford to make effective use of the services offered atop it or if the services cannot keep pace with consumer demand over time. Services must be activated and delivered, maintenance must be performed before troubles arise, "middle mile" capacity must be procured, and upgrades must be made to facilities and electronics to enable services to keep pace with consumer demand and business needs. In addition to these ongoing operating costs, networks are hardly ever "paid for" once built; rather, they are often built leveraging substantial loans that must be repaid over a series of years or even decades.

All of these factors make the delivery of broadband in rural America an ongoing effort that requires sustained commitment, rather than a one-time declaration of "success" just for the very preliminary act of connecting a certain number of locations. Particularly when one considers that even where networks are available many rural Americans pay far more for broadband than urban consumers, it becomes apparent that the job of really connecting rural America – and, just as importantly, sustaining those connections – is far from complete. Federal law mandates that the federal USF ensures reasonably comparable services are available at reasonably comparable rates in rural and urban areas alike. This mission encompasses sustainability, performance, and affordability, and it cannot be lost even as we focus on deployment as an important part – but only one part – of solving the broadband equation.

To that end, it will be important to ensure a sustainable future for the federal USF, which is funded by assessing user fees on basic telecommunications services. This declining revenue pool puts an ever-increasing burden on so-called "legacy service" customers to fund what is now a broadband program. The House Financial Services and General Government Appropriations report has for several years now wisely directed the FCC to work with the Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service on recommendations for contribution reform to ensure the long-term sustainability and viability of the USF programs.[3] The future of predictable High Cost USF support that enables and then sustains substantial long-term investments in rural networks and the ability of consumers to adopt services delivered over them will hinge on the FCC heeding this direction from Congress.

Aiming Higher and Doing Better

When it comes to solving broadband challenges, we as a nation can aim higher and do better than we have to date. In the past, too many programs have ended up funding broadband that risks becoming irrelevant and unhelpful for consumers in short order. Instead of creating programs where the goal is simply that "every provider can play" on a "technologically neutral" basis, we must focus on the consumer experience and require the deployment of networks that in a decade or more will still deliver speeds and other performance capabilities that customers can rely upon in working or learning from home and that businesses feel will be worth the effort in considering relocation to a rural market. As described further below, we also need to be sure that those promising such performance can deliver on

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[3] *See* H. Rept. 116-122 (p 55); H. Rept. 115-792 (p 46); H. Rept. 115-234 (p 48); and H. Rept. 114-624 (p 59).

their promises – it does no good to find out only months or even years after funding decisions have been made that a given provider or the technology it plans to use cannot deliver on the claims that have been made. A failure to demand better performance in new awards of funding or to vet providers before making such awards ultimately risks being a failure for the consumers in need of service.

If broadband is the critical infrastructure of the 21st century, we should aim to build sustainable infrastructure rather than stitching things together in ways that require starting the effort all over again just a few years later. Put plainly, when we are choosing what kinds of new networks to build, we need more fiber to help promote better broadband and to further a 5G future. Driving adoption should also become an express complementary goal of any efforts aimed at tackling availability – we are not building networks for their own sake but for the use of as many consumers as possible, and providers should be charged specifically to promote digital equity and inclusion on networks as they deploy them.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE

President Biden expressly recognized the importance of advanced communications networks by including broadband within his broader infrastructure initiative, and Congress and the administration have of course taken a series of important steps to address distinct affordability challenges and unique problems associated with remote learning. NTCA applauds the apparent consensus that policymakers view broadband as an infrastructure priority and welcomes the opportunity to participate in a further discussion on how best to tackle this priority. Before turning to specific thoughts on paths forward, it may make sense first to outline a few key objectives for consideration with respect to any broadband infrastructure plan:

- *Future-Proof Networks*: Any resources provided as part of an infrastructure plan should look to get the best return on such long-term investments. For networks with useful lives measured in decades – especially private investments that leverage federal dollars – this should drive the deployment of infrastructure capable of meeting consumer demands not only of today and tomorrow, but for ten or twenty years. Putting resources toward infrastructure that needs to be substantially rebuilt in only a few years' time could turn out to be federal resources wasted – and would still risk leaving rural America behind.

- *Coordinate with and Leverage Existing Broadband Programs*: Any plan should leverage what is already in place and has worked before. Creating new programs from scratch is not easy, and if a new broadband infrastructure initiative conflicts with existing efforts, that could undermine our nation's shared broadband deployment goals. Any new federal broadband program must coordinate with existing federal broadband programs at the FCC, USDA, and National Telecommunications and Information Administration, and also state broadband programs. The FCC's implementation of the Broadband DATA Act's requirements for more granular data and a process for challenging and verifying the provider-supplied data should help coordination as the maps improve and more government entities gain confidence to use this resource to determine who has service and who will have service through an ongoing deployment. Additionally, while not all existing programs may have worked as intended, those existing programs that have worked well and the data show are successful in promoting both accountability and proven

results should receive additional support to build upon their successes rather than having all new funds directed only to new programs that may duplicate efforts.

- ***Direct Funding for New Deployments to Unserved Areas***: When it comes to designing programs that will fund new construction specifically, these resources should be targeted to unserved areas to limit overbuilding of existing networks that are meeting federal broadband standards. We should focus such new construction funding on the areas most lacking in broadband and then seek to build the best kinds of networks in those areas – and we can turn our attention thereafter to the areas next most in need once that is complete. This approach will ensure the best possible use of federal resources in the form of targeting funds for new networks to the consumers that need help most and ensuring that the networks then built to serve those consumers will last for decades thereafter.

- ***Hold Providers Accountable***: There should be clear standards for what will be expected of and achievable by providers looking to leverage any resources made available through such an initiative. Looking to providers with proven track records in delivering real results makes the most sense, but whoever receives any support should be required to show clearly that they used those resources to deliver better, more affordable broadband that will satisfy consumer demand over the life of the network in question.

- ***Networks Must be Sustained***: Any broadband infrastructure plan needs to be carefully designed and sufficiently supported to tackle the challenges presented. This is a question of both program focus and program scope.

  o From a focus perspective, any infrastructure plan should aim toward not only getting broadband where it is not but then sustaining it where it already is; deployment of duplicative infrastructure in rural areas that may not even support a single network on their own will undermine the sustainability of existing network assets.
  o From a scope perspective, deploying and sustaining rural broadband is neither cheap nor easy; we need to recognize that finite resources are available to address any number of priorities, but any plan that calls for broadband deployment – especially in high-cost rural America – should match resources to the size of the problem to be solved.

- ***Leverage Community-Based Providers:*** Providers like Yelcot and Mountain View live in or very close to the areas they serve – we know our customers, we know the geography, and we know the business of delivering communications services in these areas. As policymakers look for solutions to deliver broadband in unserved parts of rural America, small businesses based in or near those areas offer the greatest promise for achieving results quickly and effectively. Regardless of whether a provider is a cooperative or a commercial operator, like Yelcot and Mountain View, we strongly urge Congress and the Biden administration to "look local" when identifying broadband solutions – and to leverage the expertise and experience of smaller community-based providers regardless of corporate form, in overcoming these challenges.

- ***Promote Local Partnerships:*** Based in the small rural communities they serve, service providers like Yelcot and Mountain View have deep long-standing relationships with their local governments and anchor institutions. The best results can often be achieved when private operators with significant experience in building networks and delivering communications services work together with stakeholders in the community to identify and respond to specific needs. Creating programs that encourage and incentivize such partnerships and collaboration could unleash broadband investment and help sustain those networks once built.

BROADBAND MUST BE BOTH AVAILABLE AND AFFORDABLE

Even where service is determined to be available, those living at the location will not truly have broadband access until they can afford to pay for it. Although the USF Lifeline program is available to help consumers purchase broadband, the subsidy is too low to make a meaningful difference on most broadband bills, especially in rural areas where it costs more to deliver broadband services and where the High Cost USF program only subsidizes rates to a level that is still somewhat higher than the urban average rate.

We therefore strongly supported enactment of the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) in December 2020 to provide eligible consumers with at least $50 a month to purchase broadband service. Yelcot and Mountain View are both participating in the EBB program to ensure that every consumer in our service who wants broadband service will have it. The Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) will also help by paying for the reasonable cost of service and equipment for school students and staff and library patrons at non-school and library locations during the COVID-19 emergency.

As the names make clear, however, these are temporary programs designed to help consumers pay for service during emergencies. The EBB and ECF will provide good opportunities to learn what works best to promote broadband affordability, and those lessons will hopefully then be applied to permanent solutions with more predictable and sufficient funding.

But we do not need a trial run to know that, as Congress further considers measures to spur deployment and ensure consumers can afford broadband, it will be important to distinguish affordability from availability. If a location already has a sufficient broadband connection available or if a federal or state program is in the process of funding construction of such a connection, then the focus should be on ensuring consumers can afford that service instead of attempting to offer a second connection. As noted above, High Cost USF provides ongoing support to providers to ensure that service is *both* available *and* reasonably comparable in price and quality to what is available in urban areas, but complicated FCC formulas established long ago aim only for an "average rural" rate that is materially higher than the "average urban" rate. (For example, the FCC's target "reasonable comparability" benchmark for High Cost USF networks is $106.20 per month for a 100/10 service and $86.72 per month for a 25/3 service – an amount that, as I understand it, is quite higher than what urban consumers pay on average.) Hence the need for separate measures – whether through Lifeline, something like the EBB, or a new permanent program – that must be targeted at affordability as opposed to duplicating the work of High Cost USF by supporting a second connection.

BARRIERS TO BROADBAND DEPLOYMENT

Even as making the business case for broadband investment represents the most significant barrier to the availability and affordability of broadband in rural areas, other barriers as well warrant consideration and resolution.

Permitting Delays

Building broadband networks is capital-intensive and time-consuming; building them in rural areas involves a special further set of obstacles. The primary challenge of rural network deployment is in crossing hundreds or thousands of miles where the terrain is diverse and sparsely populated. To complicate further the unique rural challenges of distance and density, when crossing federal lands or railroad rights-of-way in rural America, network operators must address environmental and historical permitting concerns or contractual obligations that can delay construction projects and increase their already high costs.

Navigating byzantine application and review processes within individual federal land-managing and property-managing agencies can be burdensome for any network provider, but particularly the smaller network operators that serve the most rural portions of the U.S. landmass. The review procedures can take substantial amounts of time, undermining the ability to plan for and deploy broadband infrastructure – especially in those areas of the country with shorter construction seasons due to weather. Additionally, obtaining reasonable terms and conditions for attaching network facilities to poles that are owned and operated by other entities can result in long delays and costly fees charged to providers seeking to build out networks to rural communities lacking service.

As pleased as we are with the progress on completing two of the previously mentioned ReConnect-supported projects, unfortunately the second award received by Mountain View is waiting on final approval from RUS before construction can begin. We are ready to move on the deployment, and no one is more eager for that than the customers who will receive a much higher quality of broadband service in the end, but an unfinished historical permitting review means we cannot proceed with the work. Safeguarding the environment and other considerations are of course important and we understand the need for the reviews. It would help tremendously for Congress to ensure that permitting entities have the resources to timely complete reviews and are given reasonable but firm timelines for doing so.

We have seen much agreement for some time now on solutions to simplifying the administrative barriers to deployment. The standardization of application, fee and approval policies and procedures across federal land-managing and property-managing agencies to the extent possible should be a high priority. A great starting point would be the recommendations of the FCC's Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee's Streamlining Federal Siting Working Group final report issued in January 2018.[4] NTCA participated in the development of these recommendations, which address streamlining of environmental and historical reviews and application review periods, among other pertinent recommendations in removing further regulatory barriers to broadband deployment.

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[4] *See* Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee, Streamlining Federal Siting Working Group, Final Report, FCC, (Jan. 23, 2018).

Addressing Supply Chain Concerns

As numerous broadband infrastructure programs work now to help fill gaps in coverage across our country, and as additional programs are considered to help finally overcome persistent digital divides, it is important to monitor the status of the communications supply chain. We are currently hearing of shortages and increasing delays in order fulfillment – ranging from several weeks to up to one year – for critical communications equipment like fiber, routers, antennas, network terminals, and customer premise equipment due to a mix of pandemic-related impacts and increased demand for broadband investment. Yelcot received a notice from a supplier in February of this year stating that most manufacturers' lead times are now 20 weeks, and just last week the same supplier reported that some distributors will not receive materials until the end of the year or first quarter 2022.

To ensure that existing and new infrastructure initiatives are as successful as possible in responding to consumer needs and demands, we believe it is important that the federal government play a central role in working closely and directly with manufacturers, distributors, and other suppliers to avoid disruptions in the communications supply chain. As Congress is poised to make future investments to solve the digital divide once and for all, supply chain shortages must be addressed – or else the billions of dollars in funds intended for immediate broadband deployment risk being tied up in held orders and delayed shipments. There has been a great deal of focus understandably on the *security* of our supply chains. But whether it is looking to use some of the infrastructure resources to shore up and beef up domestic production of critical telecom supplies or address other shortcomings in the global supply chain, we would strongly encourage Congress to make sure as well that supply chain *continuity and reliability* are seen as key components of delivering on a successful broadband infrastructure agenda.

CONCLUSION

Robust broadband infrastructure is crucial to the current and future success of rural America. But the characteristics that enable the unique beauty and enterprise of rural America make it very expensive to deploy advanced communications services there. Our nation's small, rural, community-based telecom providers are deploying faster broadband throughout their service areas, but no provider – whether cooperative or commercial, and regardless of size – can deliver high-speed, high-capacity broadband in rural America at affordable rates without the ability to justify and then recover the initial and ongoing costs of sustaining infrastructure investment in high-cost areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic made clear to all what rural America already knew – investments in broadband infrastructure and affordability are worth it to ensure everyone will experience the numerous agricultural, economic, health, and public safety benefits of broadband. Our industry is excited to participate in the conversation regarding broadband policy initiatives, and we look forward to working with policymakers and other stakeholders on a comprehensive strategy that reflects the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and for the Committee's commitment to broadband availability and affordability in rural America.