

**Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden  
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology hearing on  
“Realizing the Benefits of Rural Broadband:  
Challenges and Solutions”**

**July 17, 2018**

Thank you, Madame Chairman. I want to welcome our witnesses to this hearing on the benefits of rural broadband. In particular, I want to thank Ms. Jenni Word with Wallowa Memorial Hospital for trekking in clear from Wallowa County, Oregon to testify here today.

Tucked up in the far northeast corner of Oregon, Wallowa County is larger than the state of Delaware and has a population of just over 6,800 people. It is rugged and remote. I worked closely with the hospital and community to help get fiber built out into the county, and we recently worked together with FCC Chairman Ajit Pai to raise the cap on the FCC’s Rural Health Care Program. This helps the Wallowa County Health Care District and other rural providers get affordable broadband service.

Ms. Word will detail the telehealth opportunities broadband access has opened up, most importantly expanding the care patients can receive locally without having to travel hours to other hospitals. That is certainly a big benefit in a place where, as a county commissioner once joked, it’s winter 11 months out of the year and sometimes snows in August.

Telemedicine, however, is only one example of the opportunities provided by broadband access in our rural communities. Eastern Oregon University, Blue Mountain Community College, and others are taking advantage of distance learning to expand access to higher education to isolated communities. Farmers and ranchers across my district have taken advantage of precision agriculture technology to reduce inputs. And, the transition to next generation 9-1-1 is critical for strengthening public safety.

Broadband is the infrastructure of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Broadband means jobs.

Jobs come from deployment – building towers and cell sites, laying fiber, launching satellites, and upgrading facilities that constitute the physical infrastructure.

The economic benefits don't stop at construction. Maintaining this infrastructure requires high-skilled jobs in engineering, network management, cybersecurity, advertising, and customer service.

And beyond all that, we know broadband is a force multiplier for job creation, providing efficiencies for every sector of the economy.

Chairman Blackburn ran through some of the bills included in RAY BAUM's Act, but the Chairman herself deserves credit for spearheading the overall effort. The legislation, now law, included many provisions to improve broadband buildout.

Take spectrum auctions for example. Spectrum auctions raise billions in federal revenue for deficit reduction. But a quirk in the law prevented the FCC from taking upfront payments of auction bidders and depositing the money directly with the U.S. Treasury. Though spectrum is the lifeblood of wireless broadband, this effectively stopped the FCC from conducting further spectrum auctions. Bear in mind that we are in a global race to 5G.

RAY BAUM'S Act fixed this by including a bipartisan bill from Mr. Guthrie and Ms. Matsui that allows the FCC to deposit upfront payments directly with the Treasury. As a result, the FCC is moving forward with its upcoming Spectrum Frontiers Auction, which will make more high-band spectrum available for 5G.

RAY BAUM'S Act was signed into law on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. I have a feeling the bill's namesake, Ray, who was from eastern Oregon and often referred to Wallowa County as "God's country," would be very proud of our efforts and the positive impact RAY BAUM'S Act has made and will make across the country.

While some may have been content with that accomplishment alone, this subcommittee continues to process important bills through regular order. Just last week, the full committee took up four more bills that were unanimously approved by this subcommittee.

These bipartisan bills included Mr. Tonko and Mr. Lance's ACCESS BROADBAND Act, which is an important and necessary step to coordinate funding for broadband across different agencies.

We also passed Mr. Latta and Mr. Loeb's Precision Agriculture Connectivity Act, which requires the FCC and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to form a task force to evaluate the best ways to leverage broadband for modern, high-tech farming and ranching.

These bills illustrate what we can accomplish when we work together to fix problems on a bipartisan basis.

However, other members have put forward bills to address rural broadband challenges, and these proposals deserve consideration as well. I expect we'll hear about some of those other bills today, and I hope we can continue working on a bipartisan basis to get them signed into law.

I look forward to this hearing as a follow-up to the January hearing on closing the digital divide, and the numerous other infrastructure-related hearings we've conducted this Congress.

I hope we can continue to work together to expand broadband for telehealth applications, precision agriculture, education, and economic opportunity across rural America.