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## **Franell | A permanent solution to net neutrality for rural Oregon**

2 hrs ago



Joseph Franell

Across our country, approximately 23 million Americans living in rural areas lack sufficient access to the internet. Many of these people are our friends and neighbors right here in Eastern Oregon, who are not connected to the single most important driver of economic growth, job creation, and a better quality of life.

Bridging this digital-divide in Oregon is a top priority of mine as an internet service provider (ISP). This is something that I highlighted during a hearing before the Energy and Commerce Committee in Washington, D.C., last month, when Representative Greg Walden invited me to testify about the importance of a free and open internet for rural broadband expansion. As Congress continues to debate the future of the internet this week, I'd like to share my perspective as a small ISP working to bridge the digital divide in Eastern Oregon.

For underserved communities in our part of the state, small ISPs like Eastern Oregon Telecom (EOT) are on the front lines of connecting rural areas with high-speed broadband.

Unfortunately, as ISPs much larger than mine and giant internet companies like Netflix and YouTube were arguing over the terms of their traffic focused primarily on our country's largest cities, the Obama Administration came down on the side of the Silicon Valley companies. The end result was the unelected former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) instituting heavy-handed, one-size-fits-all regulations that hurt small ISPs, including EOT. This in turn hurt our ability to expand broadband to underserved communities.

Case in point is the 2015 net neutrality rule that regulated internet service under Title II of the Communications Act, which was originally used to govern monopoly telephone companies in the 1930s. While Title II sounds innocuous, this rule gave big government unlimited authority to micromanage every single aspect of a provider's business, including rate fixing, taxing the internet, and even censoring content.

For EOT and other small ISPs, there is nothing neutral about this kind of authority. Net neutrality shifted EOT's focus from our customers to regulatory interference and the draining cost of reporting and compliance. Every dollar we spend reporting to regulatory agencies is a dollar that is not available to invest in new infrastructure to serve rural Eastern Oregon.

Since the repeal of net neutrality, we have been able to focus on providing exceptional service and expanding into other underserved markets. And while the relief from the heavy hand of net neutrality is welcome, the prospect of a new administration reinstating Title II regulations over the internet is not.

The uncertainty of net neutrality rules ping-ponging between Republican and Democrat administrations needs to end. That's where Congress comes in.

Fortunately, as I learned while testifying before Congress, Republicans and Democrats actually agree on the key parameters of a free and open internet. A permanent, bipartisan legislative solution to net neutrality is the best path forward. There are three bills that have been introduced by Republicans on the House Energy and Commerce committee that will accomplish that goal.

Representative Walden introduced legislation that codifies into law permanent prohibitions on blocking, throttling, and paid prioritization for internet traffic, and requires that ISPs be transparent in their network management practices and prices. This legislation reaffirms longstanding, bipartisan agreements on net neutrality protections.

Representative Bob Latta, from Ohio, introduced a bill that includes important net neutrality protections without reclassifying broadband into the Title II framework that is overly burdensome and can harm investment in broadband expansion that we have seen in Oregon. This legislation is drawn directly from a bill that the last Democratic chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee proposed in 2010.

And Representative Cathy McMorris-Rodgers, from Washington State, has introduced legislation that mirrors a state law from our neighbor to the north that also prohibits blocking, throttling, and paid prioritization. This bill was passed by a Democratic legislature in Washington and signed into law by a Democratic governor.

All these proposals provide permanent net neutrality solutions that will protect consumers, innovation, and an open internet. This is something only Congress can do, but we need bipartisan support to do it the right way.

I am encouraged that there is broad agreement on permanent net neutrality protections that can be solidified into law through legislation. And I'm encouraged that Representative Walden is committed to capitalize on this opportunity for real bipartisan action.

In doing so, Congress can make sure that the internet continues to flourish under a light touch regulatory regime while providing certainty to the ISPs like EOT. That will help us expand broadband access and bridge the digital divide in Eastern Oregon and across rural America.

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*Joseph Franell is the CEO of Eastern Oregon Telecom, based in Hermiston.*