

Opening Statement of Republican Leader Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
“Connecting America: Oversight of NTIA”
February 16, 2022
(As Prepared for Delivery)

Good morning.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to congratulate you, Assistant Secretary Davidson, on your confirmation to lead the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

NTIA is tasked with ensuring all Americans have a reliable broadband connection.

This is a massive responsibility requiring significant investment, and because of this it's imperative that the Energy and Commerce committee perform its duty and conduct regular oversight of NTIA and other agencies under its jurisdiction.

Having the NTIA Assistant Secretary before us today is a great start. I also hope we can have leaders from the Federal Communications Commission before us soon, which Ranking Member Latta and I have requested.

By statute, NTIA is the President's principal advisor on all telecommunications and information policy and is responsible for representing the Executive Branch on both domestic and international communications policies.

This includes managing all federal spectrum use, ensuring the security of our communications networks and their supply chain, overseeing FirstNet and the implementation of the nationwide public safety network, coordinating broadband funding activities across the government, and now, implementing the biggest investment in broadband infrastructure in our nation's history.

Access to broadband has never been more important than during COVID-19. Because of the light-touch regulatory policies in place before the

pandemic, broadband providers were able to continue investing in their networks over the past decade, which is why, during the pandemic, American broadband networks were so dependable, even as these networks faced an unprecedented surge of individuals and businesses moving online full time.

Unfortunately, many Americans continue to live in areas with no connectivity at all. The last major investment in broadband was in 2009 when Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. NTIA received \$4.7 billion, much of which was wasted on overbuilding and failed projects. We cannot afford to let this happen again.

Through the infrastructure bill, Congress provided NTIA nearly \$43 billion for broadband deployment, more than 10 times the amount administered in 2009. This funding must be targeted to truly unserved areas; that is, areas currently lacking broadband speeds the FCC considers “served,” which are those areas that lack download speeds of 25 megabits per second and upload speeds of 3 megabits per second.

Congress also designated NTIA to track and coordinate how funds are being used for broadband across the federal government, which ensures that funds are going to unserved areas and not being used to overbuild in areas that already have reliable access.

The only way to connect all Americans is by reliably tracking broadband funding, making sure agencies utilize the FCC’s updated maps, and prioritizing unserved areas first. NTIA must get this right in order to close the digital divide once and for all.

We must also make sure our networks are secure. The Department of Commerce is implementing rules to enhance the security of our communications networks supply chain. NTIA is also administering an information sharing program for small, rural providers, which is a key provision of this Committee’s Secure and Trusted Communications Networks Act.

I look forward to hearing about NTIA’s progress in this space and their growing mission to promote supply chain security.

We also cannot forget about the importance of wireless connectivity. Wireless technologies can offer connectivity in areas unreachable by fiber. A critical role NTIA plays in promoting economic growth is managing Federal airwaves effectively to ensure America leads in next-generation technologies.

In this role, NTIA has the dual task of making sure agencies have enough spectrum for their missions, while also making sure they use their spectrum resources efficiently and work toward repurposing spectrum for commercial use.

Spectrum is a valuable, finite resource, and as we have seen in recent years, distributing this resource is only going to become more challenging over time. During recent, high-profile disputes over spectrum allocations, we've seen certain agencies, such as the Department of Transportation and Department of Defense, attempt to assert authority over commercial spectrum bands where those agencies do not hold licenses.

These costly interagency battles threaten our ability to lead the world in next-gen communications, and NTIA must assert its authority in the spectrum management process to prevent them from happening. If NTIA needs congressional support to execute its duties, we stand ready to ensure it has the resources and authorities necessary to do so.

We must have trust in the expertise at the NTIA and the FCC and confidence in NTIA's leadership in this spectrum process, which requires regular oversight like today's hearing.

Finally, I would like to add that NTIA's role in overseeing FirstNet and their implementation of the country's public safety network is critical to ensuring our First Responders can communicate at all times. You have an important mission ahead, and I am happy to have you before us today.

I look forward to the discussion today on these important topics and hope we can continue to work together going forward.

I yield back.