

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.
Communications and Technology Subcommittee

Hearing on “Oversight and Reauthorization of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration”

May 23, 2023

Today, the Committee is conducting important oversight of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration—or NTIA. This agency may not receive as much attention as others, but NTIA has done tremendous work in the last year to help connect all Americans to high-speed, reliable, and affordable broadband.

And thanks to the historic broadband investments we included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, their efforts have only just begun. NTIA will continue to play a crucial role in the years to come to achieve this objective while also helping advance other cutting-edge technologies in a safe and secure manner.

Their role is crucial because broadband is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity. It’s needed for Americans to do their jobs, run their small businesses, study for school, meet with their doctor for a telehealth visit, and connect with family and friends. Unfortunately, it is estimated that 24 million Americans are still without home broadband internet access.

For years, we have discussed ways to bridge the digital divide so that all Americans can take part in today’s connected society. Fortunately, last Congress, we delivered for the American people with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which includes a \$42.45 billion investment in broadband buildout. This investment will help us ensure every American has access to reliable, high-speed internet.

But we know that physical infrastructure alone will not close the digital divide. And that’s why we also included the Digital Equity Act as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This program will address barriers to broadband adoption faced by specific communities, like seniors and veterans, who may lack some of the skills needed to fully participate in the digital economy.

I look forward to getting an update from NTIA today on all of these important broadband programs, including those we enacted on a bipartisan basis in the Consolidated Appropriations Act in 2021.

Congress has also tasked NTIA with other important responsibilities. These include managing federal spectrum users, coordinating with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to ensure that our airwaves are effectively managed, and advising the President on advanced technologies.

Here we are two months after the expiration of the FCC's spectrum auction authority and I want to once again emphasize the importance of reauthorizing this important program. I am concerned that this lapse will cause us to lose footing on the international stage. Congress designated NTIA as the manager of federal spectrum and we must put the disputes of the past behind us so government can speak with one unified voice in spectrum management decisions.

That's why I'm pleased we are considering a discussion draft from Chairman Latta that will reauthorize NTIA and elevate its leadership in the Department of Commerce. Making these changes will better reflect NTIA's importance to the President and the American people. Given NTIA's enormous responsibilities, I hope my Republican colleagues will not only reauthorize the agency, but also ensure that NTIA is fully funded for this coming fiscal year. The Republicans' Default on America Act threatens to undermine NTIA's ability to connect communities that have been left behind for far too long.

We will also be considering several Democratic-led bills, including legislation that will require NTIA to provide critical data on diversity and equity objectives with respect to broadband programs as well as closing the digital divide. Legislation to direct NTIA to develop measures that allow federal spectrum users to operate more efficiently and enhance federal spectrum relocation efforts. And we'll also discuss legislation that directs NTIA to assess both the degree to which artificial intelligence systems are accountable to consumers and the value of developing a trans-Atlantic submarine fiber cable connecting the United States, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and countries in West Africa.

Finally, NTIA plays an important role in public safety communications. From managing next generation 9-1-1 grants, to its oversight of FirstNet, and its important first responder work at the Institute for Telecommunication Sciences, NTIA is at the forefront of ensuring that the public and law enforcement agencies have a modern and reliable communications network.

There is obviously a lot for us to discuss as we continue our efforts to connect America. I welcome Administrator Davidson back to the Committee.