

Rep. Huffman Testimony on *H.R. 2611, Public Lands  
Telecommunications Act*  
National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands Subcommittee  
Legislative Hearing  
Thursday, June 18, 3:30pm ET  
*[724 words, ~4 min]*

Thank you Chair Haaland for including H.R. 2611, the Public Lands Telecommunications Act, in today's legislative hearing and for the opportunity to testify in support of my bill.

This bill takes an innovative approach to broadband deployment by providing federal land management agencies the authority, incentives, and resources to expand telecommunications infrastructure and services in rural communities and Tribal lands.

First, it is modeled on proven successes of land use fees, providing fee retention authority for Interior Department agencies like the Bureau of Land Management or the National Park Service for rights-of-way and other telecommunications infrastructure use authorizations. The bill would ensure those fees are reinvested to further broadband and telecommunications deployment.

That means that when a company pays a land management agency for a permit, such as to construct a cell tower or run a fiber optic cable, that money would stay with the agency. That money would then go toward activities like preparing needs assessments to designate communication sites, developing management plans for communication sites on public lands, training to manage these sites, expanding partnerships with nearby communities and private industry, or improving access or establishing potential sites for deployment. With this bill, agencies would have an incentive to partner with industry and local communities to provide the resources that they need. My bill also specifies that right of way fees, which must be based on fair market value by law, be publicly available

and updated. This is important for providers to have enough certainty so that they will be active participants in these partnerships as well.

Second, the bill provides cooperative agreement authority so that public land management agencies can work with private industry and local communities to expand telecommunications infrastructure and services. Public land management agencies have a long history of partnering with private industry to serve the public interest. I've seen the need for this work in my own district, where rural communities and industry are hoping to partner with public land management agencies to meet shared broadband infrastructure needs.

For rural communities and Tribes in my district and throughout the West, it is time to leverage our nation's public lands for investments in telecommunications infrastructure. High speed broadband is essential to economic development, education, public safety, and a vibrant quality of life, but nationwide, nearly one quarter of rural Americans and one third of those on Tribal land lack access to advanced broadband. The longer we allow the digital divide to persist, the more Americans are going to be left behind.

Because of the pandemic, more Americans now have a clearer understanding of the importance of broadband access. People are staying home from work or school and are forced to rely on remote work, distance learning, telehealth, virtual meetings - but this all depends on having a decent internet connection. The current public health crisis has reminded us of many inequalities and their consequences, including how a lack of broadband access significantly impacts the well-being of Americans around the country.

With increased authorities, incentives, and resources, our land management agencies can help address the digital divide in rural and Tribal communities, particularly those in the West that are adjacent to or nearby public land. Better broadband connections can also improve management and safety - park visitors can enjoy better interpretive

services and improved public safety responses, and public agencies can practice more efficient land management and better equip their first responders.

I've heard from my constituents who live in rural and remote parts of California and those in the telecommunications industry about the challenges of broadband deployment on federal lands. The approach that I'm proposing is straightforward and doesn't cost the federal government. The bill is broadly supported by industry, rural communities, and a similar version of the bill was reported out of the Natural Resources Committee by unanimous consent last Congress.

While telecommunications infrastructure isn't the first thing most people think about when it comes to this subcommittee, there is significant opportunity to improve the lives of Americans with expanded access to reliable broadband by utilizing our public lands. It's time to take action to ensure that communities don't fall further behind in an increasingly online and digital world.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on my bill, and thank you for inviting my constituent, Connie Stewart, who will also be providing testimony today.

I yield back.