



**Statement of the
Missouri Farm Bureau Federation**

TO THE HOUSE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE

**A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Broadband
September 15, 2022**

**Presented By:
Garrett Hawkins
President
Missouri Farm Bureau**

Good morning, Chairman Scott (D-GA), Ranking Member Thompson (R-PA) and members of the Committee. My name is Garrett Hawkins, and I am a fifth-generation farmer from Appleton City, Missouri, and the third generation in my family to own and operate the farm on which we live today. Agriculture runs deep in our extended family and spans livestock, row crop, and dairy production. I am a proud husband and father, and I serve as President of Missouri Farm Bureau (MOFB). I appreciate the opportunity to provide input on the necessity of rural broadband deployment and its importance across rural America.

Deployment of broadband technology is a critical link in stimulating and revitalizing the rural economy. Rural broadband is essential to modern agriculture, the farmers and ranchers who grow our food and the quality of life for rural Americans. While most Americans take broadband for granted, according to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) nearly 19 million Americans lack access to broadband. This is not distributed evenly, 17% of rural Americans lack access to broadband, compared to only 1% of urban Americans. Keep in mind that the statistic referenced above is only an estimate, as FCC's data collection and mapping processes are viewed as unreliable by many experts in the broadband field. Regardless, the number of people in rural America that lack access to broadband is discouraging. Farm Bureau members have recognized the urgent need to deploy broadband in rural communities and have elevated broadband access and affordability as a priority due to its impact on their daily lives.

In Missouri, we have taken strong action to bring broadband to more rural communities. In 2017, Missouri Farm Bureau convened the "Missouri Broadband Working Group." This group was comprised of over 120 stakeholders from all industries that formed legislative and regulatory recommendations that were ultimately taken to our Governor and Congressional delegation. As a result, Missouri's Governor established the Office of Broadband within our Department of Economic Development. This office is responsible for keeping their finger on the pulse of all things broadband in Missouri. The creation of this office would not have been possible without the collaborative efforts of Farm Bureau, our state Departments of Agriculture and Economic Development, and the University of Missouri.

In addition, we successfully advocated for the Missouri Broadband Grant Program, which provides financial assistance to providers who are seeking to deploy broadband in underserved and unserved areas. Over the years, this program has grown, and in 2022 Missouri legislators approved a \$265 million investment into the grant program via the State of Missouri's share of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). This program would fund new broadband projects across the state in unserved and underserved communities, which the bill defines as areas lacking 25/3 Mbps. Additionally, in 2020, the Missouri legislature passed legislation supported by MOFB that would allow our Department of Economic Development's Community Improvement District and Neighborhood Improvement District programs to be used to facilitate broadband deployment within special districts.

Although we have been able to make significant strides in our state, the work is far from finished. Farm Bureau continues to advocate for strong investment to support broadband deployment in rural communities. Our state is already laying the groundwork for a successful rollout of the Broadband Equity, Access & Deployment (BEAD) program and the Digital Equity Act (DEA), which were passed as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021

(IIJA). Missouri Farm Bureau, Missouri's Department of Economic Development, and other partners such as the University of Missouri Extension will be engaged in a full statewide tour and plan to hear from local communities to address real world challenges as we deploy programs. As an organization we are advocating that the state direct adequate funding for the deployment of broadband internet service to unserved agricultural areas.

Knowing where adequate broadband services do and do not exist is critical to crafting sound public policies related to broadband deployment in rural areas. Missouri's Office of Broadband will be addressing this challenge head on by allocating recently approved ARPA funds for a statewide mapping initiative.

The ability of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and all other relevant agencies to utilize accurate broadband coverage maps is crucial. Last Congress, Farm Bureau advocated for the passage of the Broadband Deployment Accuracy and Technological Availability Act (Broadband DATA Act). This bipartisan and comprehensive bill improves the accuracy of broadband coverage maps and better directs federal funds for broadband buildout. Specifically, it requires the FCC to improve the accuracy and granularity of its maps by establishing a serviceable location fabric, which will serve as a baseline for served, underserved and unserved broadband areas, an outcome that Farm Bureau policy supports. We are pleased to see the FCC is making progress on these new maps and look forward to their expected release by the end of the year.

Farmers and ranchers depend on broadband just as they do highways, railways and waterways to ship food, fuel and fiber across the country and around the world. Many of the latest yield-maximizing farming techniques require broadband connections for data collection and analysis performed both on the farm and in remote data centers. However, 18% of U.S. farms have no access to the internet, according to the USDA report, "Farm Computer Usage and Ownership, 2021."

I serve as part of the FCC's Precision Agriculture Connectivity Task Force Accelerating Broadband Deployment on Unserved Agricultural Lands Working Group. America's farmers and ranchers embrace technology that allows their farming businesses to be more efficient, economical and environmentally responsible. Today's farmers and ranchers are using precision agricultural techniques to make decisions that impact the amount of fertilizer they need to purchase and apply to their fields, the amount of water needed to sustain crops, and the amount and type of herbicides or pesticides needed. These are only a few examples of how farmers use broadband connectivity to achieve optimal yield, improve environmental impact and maximize profits.

Beyond specific on-farm needs, rural communities need access to health care, government services, and educational and business opportunities. For many rural communities, access can only be gained by using broadband services and sophisticated technologies that require high-speed connections. The coronavirus pandemic only exacerbated and made more apparent the need for broadband in rural communities as employees shifted to working from home, school districts closed and resorted to distance learning platforms, and patients sought health care through telemedicine platforms.

The upcoming Farm Bill is an important opportunity for this committee to continue the good work that USDA is already doing in the broadband space, including but not limited to the Re-Connect Program. In the 2018 Farm Bill, Missouri Farm Bureau successfully worked with Congresswoman Vicky Hartzler (R-MO) to pass an amendment that set the minimum buildout speed for USDA-funded broadband programs at 25/3 Mbps. We also appreciate the committee's directive in the last Farm Bill to better coordinate interoperability among broadband programs administered by USDA, FCC, and NTIA.

Precision agricultural equipment requires a wireless broadband connection for data collection and analysis performed both on the farm and in remote data centers. As more precision equipment becomes available, farmers and ranchers cannot take full advantage of technologically advanced equipment if they do not have access to wireless broadband in the field and on the ranch. A 2021 study, "The Future of American Farming: Broadband Solutions for the Farm Office, Field, and Community," released by the Benton Institute for Broadband Society and sponsored by the United Soybean Board, found that to meet the growing demand among farmers for both upstream and downstream speeds, networks must be capable of 100/100 Mbps service. Upload speeds are sometimes more important to farmers and ranchers since they often need to upload data at faster speeds than they need to download items.

As the committee and agencies contemplate future broadband needs, MOFB and the American Farm Bureau Federation recommend the agency coordinate closely with the USDA Rural Utilities Service as well as the FCC Precision Agriculture Connectivity Task Force to support the interests of rural communities and agriculture.

As Congress and the Administration implement programs that support the deployment of broadband to rural communities, please consider the following principles.

- **Improve Data Accuracy & Mapping:** We continue to advocate for additional mapping and the use of more granular data sets when determining which areas are eligible for federal (and state) funding.
- **Plan for the Future:** When awarding broadband projects, we should consider speeds that account for teleworking and remote education needs, rather than just recreational use of broadband.
- **Foster Local, State, and Federal Partnerships:** Close working relationships between local, state, and federal partners are critical to maximize the use of funds available for broadband deployment. Various entities that deploy broadband should work together in order to ensure the needs of rural America are being met.
- **Focus on Precision Agriculture:** Too often, federal programs do not take into account the specific needs of agriculture and rural America when developing programs that incentivize deployment. Agriculture as a whole has the potential to be a strong beneficiary of rural broadband services, and it will be important to take these needs into account. Access to broadband and data services can result in more data-driven decisions on the farm, if the technology is available.

Farm Bureau appreciates the Committee's commitment to expanding broadband to all of rural

America. Broadband is essential to modern agriculture, the farmers and ranchers who grow our food and the quality of life for rural Americans. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on an issue so critically important to the individuals Farm Bureau represents. I look forward to answering any questions the committee has on this important matter.