

**Rep. Escobar, Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug
Administration and Related Agencies Testimony**

Thank you, Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Fortenberry for this chance to discuss priorities I have before the Agriculture subcommittee.

This year's community project funding process was a great opportunity to engage with El Pasoans who are on the ground and know the needs of our region best. I am proud to have submitted one of these projects to your subcommittee for consideration.

As you are all well aware, the pandemic has shown us just how important broadband access is, especially for remote learning. However, there are communities across the country that simply lack the resources and funding needed to expand their broadband capabilities. The pandemic exacerbated the digital divide and now we must do what we can to ensure these communities have the broadband access they need to prosper for the duration of the pandemic as well as after it is over.

That is why I have submitted the Cotton Valley Connect project for consideration under the Reconnect Grant account. This project would assist the students and families of the Fabens and Tornillo Independent School Districts by providing them with public broadband access via a wireless mesh service. These two school districts serve some of the most economically disadvantaged communities and census tracts in El Paso County, and expanding broadband access in these areas would positively impact the lives of over three thousand students. Giving these students the ability to access learning resources from their own homes will have several practical effects like allowing them to conduct research for homework or prepare for a class presentation. There will also be a broader effect of developing these students so they can graduate high school and contribute to the economic success of our region. While the location of this project is just outside my district, these students and their families are linked to the Paso del Norte region and providing them with the means to thrive will ultimately help all of El Paso County.

Finally, I would like to emphasize with this subcommittee, as I have with other appropriations subcommittees I have testified in front of, that it is essential you include mechanisms within your bill to guarantee federal funding will make it to its designated recipient. This is especially important for items like community project funds which are designated for local governments and other entities. As you may know, for months Texas Governor Greg Abbott held critical COVID relief funds hostage. This means entities like schools have been unable to properly spend relief funds on COVID safety measures or were unable to reimburse themselves. While Governor Abbott recently released some of these funds, it is clear strong language needs to be put in place to prevent something like this from happening again. I urge the subcommittee to take this into consideration while you are drafting the final bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and I look forward to collaborating with the subcommittee as you continue to draft the final appropriations bill.