Opening Statement of the Honorable Marsha Blackburn
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Hearing on “Defining and Mapping Broadband Coverage in America”
June 21, 2017

(As approved for delivery)

Welcome everyone to the Communications and Technology Subcommittee’s hearing titled: “Defining and Mapping Broadband Coverage in America”. Also, thank you to the witnesses for appearing as we examine the definition of broadband and existing challenges in updating the National Broadband Map – which has not occurred since June 2014. Broadband is the infrastructure challenge of this decade and the “digital divide” continues to plague rural America in particular. We must be good stewards of taxpayer money by ensuring that there is access to accurate data so that areas with the greatest need for broadband services are targeted by public and private investments.

This hearing will be divided into two discussions – “Defining Broadband Coverage” and “Mapping Broadband Coverage”. The FCC redefined minimum broadband download speeds at 25 megabits per second in 2015 as part of its Broadband Progress Report. This represented a dramatic shift from the previous standard of 4 megabits per second and resulted in a significant change in the number of Americans considered covered by broadband. Broadband services and usage run the gamut from basic and light to advanced and high. Americans utilize the Internet for a variety of things and we realize that there is increasing demand for higher speeds. However, we should whether a “totality of the circumstances” test is perhaps appropriate in determining how we define broadband connectivity. Particular weight should be given to factors such as the current level of coverage – or lack thereof, and cost of deployment.

Mapping broadband coverage will be a second discussion point. Each Administration has taken action to spur broadband deployment beginning with the Clinton Administration’s efforts in 1995 when GSA tried to streamline the permitting process for wireless antennas. Approximately $7.2 billion in Federal grants and loans were awarded through NTIA’s Broadband Technology Opportunity Program or “BTOP” and the RUS Broadband Initiative Program or “BIP” as a part of the Obama Administration’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. $293 million dollars of this money went to
the State Broadband Initiative, which numerous states used to create public-private partnerships to generate a map.

NTIA had authority over the National Broadband Map, but it was transferred to the FCC when BTOP funding to update the map ran out in June 2014. More importantly, a GAO analysis of the ARRA’s implementation revealed that data collection methods needed improvement in order to be more effective. In short, billions in taxpayer money was spent on broadband deployment by the last Administration, but failed to achieve desired results as little more than 183,000 miles of network infrastructure was built.

The economic, educational and healthcare opportunities that come with unleashing broadband are undeniable. A recent Accenture report notes that smart cities growth could result in a $500 billion impact on GDP over ten years. However, accurately defining broadband and ensuring access to accurate mapping data is imperative so that hard-working taxpayer money targets areas most in need of broadband service. Those who do not learn from the mistakes of the past are doomed to repeat them. We should proceed as expeditiously as possible, but with caution.

Thank you.