

Washington, DC - The Congressional Rural Caucus, led by the Caucus' Telecommunications Task Force Chairs Reps. Bart Stupak (D-MI) and Lee Terry (R-NE), sent a letter to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) urging the agency to address the needs of rural America as it begins to develop a broadband strategy to provide universal access nationwide. Under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the FCC is required to submit a national broadband plan to Congress by February 17, 2010.

"The biggest telecommunications challenge facing rural America is access to broadband Internet," said Congressman Stupak. "The economic recovery bill makes an important commitment to expanding broadband access, but this must be an ongoing effort to connect our communities - large and small - to the global economy. In today's economy, one of the most fundamental tools of business is access to the Internet, which is why broadband deployment is so critically important. I look forward to working with my Rural Caucus colleagues to see that a national broadband strategy meets the needs of rural America."

"It is imperative that the Commission focus on unserved areas as they work towards a broadband strategy that will hopefully provide a blueprint for ubiquitous access across the country," said Congressman Terry. "I look forward to working with my Rural Caucus colleagues later this summer on incorporating broadband into the Universal Service Fund."

"Universal broadband access is critical to strengthening rural communities and fueling economic development throughout rural America," said Caucus Co-Chair Congressman Travis Childers (D-MS). "Basic broadband service is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity. Right now, many rural areas are struggling with limited access to this critical technology. As Members representing rural districts, my colleagues and I on the Rural Caucus understand that any effective national broadband strategy must address the challenges currently confronting rural America and take the necessary steps to improve access in these communities. I hope that the FCC will consider the Rural Caucus' suggestions as it begins to develop its plan."

"High-speed Internet service for economic development is particularly important in rural areas. Broadband services enable rural entrepreneurs and small businesses to easily connect to one another and to potential customers which allows communities to compete globally," said Caucus Co-Chair Congressman Adrian Smith (R-NE). "In addition to empowering farmers to identify consumer demand and access new markets, broadband services and new wireless technologies can be employed to create efficiencies in farming and livestock operations: real-time access to weather reports; satellite mapping to match seed, fertilizer, and crop protection applications to local soil conditions; Global Positioning Systems for spraying herbicides and pesticides; remote monitoring of livestock operations; and the ability to track livestock over a wide range of property."

The Rural Caucus provided the following comments in its letter to the FCC:

In its proposal to Congress, the FCC should include recommendations on how to maximize federal investments in broadband expansion by enhancing coordination and information sharing

among various Departments. For example, a number of Departments tasked with funding infrastructure projects can coordinate opportunities for broadband deployment with the FCC.

A national broadband strategy should continue the federal government's initial investment, which began with the Recovery Act, beyond fiscal year 2010. While the Recovery Act will help address construction barriers to broadband deployment, its funding for such projects will end next year. An effective broadband strategy will authorize some sort of continuation of this program so that we can continue construction projects that help expand service.

Providing access to rural areas should be a top priority of any successful national broadband plan. Specifically, federal investments in expanding broadband access should target areas without service and focus on projects that attempt to provide access to the most people at the lowest costs, or projects with the biggest bang for their buck.

A national strategy should place an emphasis on providing incentives and funding opportunities that target businesses, schools, hospitals, and other public and private sectors that are capable of serving as anchor tenants for expanding broadband networks in rural communities. Connecting these institutions will directly benefit the lives of rural residents while simultaneously reducing the costs of providing additional residential broadband access.

It is imperative that a national broadband plan addresses unique cases where existing and future funding is still not enough. Despite the private funds that have been invested in broadband access across the country, and additional federal funding that will be invested in the coming years, some communities in the most rural areas may continue to lack broadband access in the future if they do not receive adequate consideration under the FCC's plan.

A national broadband plan must recognize the need to reform the Universal Service Fund (USF). USF reform must be technology neutral, recognize that broadband should be a supported service, and make special efforts to provide predictable, targeted support to achieve the goal of universal service.

The Congressional Rural Caucus is a bipartisan working group of members dedicated to addressing the pressing and unique issues facing America's rural communities. The body serves to collectively address these challenges and promote legislation that includes sound rural policies. The Caucus is chaired by Congressmen Travis Childers (D-MS) and Adrian Smith (R-NE), and vice-chaired by Congressmen Glenn Thompson (R-PA) and Tim Walz (D-MN).

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June 26, 2009

The Honorable Michael Copps  
Acting-Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission

445 12th Street, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20554

RE: GN Docket No. 09-51

Dear Chairman Copps:

With the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), Congress has required the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to begin developing a national broadband plan to be submitted by February 17, 2010. This plan will propose how to ensure that every American has access to broadband. As Members of the bipartisan Congressional Rural Caucus, we submit the following comments to be included as the FCC begins this national dialogue.

Currently a number of federal programs already invest in broadband deployment. A challenge that faces the Departments tasked with direct implementation is the need for intense coordination. In addition, a number of Departments tasked with funding infrastructure projects may present missed synergistic opportunities for broadband deployment. In its proposal to Congress, the FCC should include recommendations on how to maximize federal investments into broadband by enhancing coordination and information sharing between the agencies.

As part of the ARRA, Congress provided \$4.7 billion for the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and another \$2.5 billion to the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to expand broadband throughout the country. A majority of these funds will focus on the construction of self sustaining broadband projects. While the impact of the ARRA broadband funding remains to be seen, its intent is well founded in addressing the barriers to broadband access in rural areas. Any aggressive strategy to connect every American should continue the federal government's initial investment, which began with ARRA, beyond fiscal year 2010.

Future investments into expanding broadband access by the federal government should primarily be focused on areas without service and be made in a technologically neutral manner. In addition, an emphasis should be placed on projects that seek to connect the most individuals in the most cost effective manner with these scarce federal resources. However, even with additional federal support, the disproportionate costs associated with rural areas require a special focus. In specific, a national broadband plan should recognize that a combined federal and private investment in "middle mile" construction can significantly bring down the costs for rural Internet Service Providers to provide broadband access.

It is an understatement to say that communities that lack broadband access in today's world are at a disadvantage. Businesses without broadband cannot compete in a globalized market, schools without broadband cannot properly prepare their students for the workforce of tomorrow, and hospitals without broadband cannot access the latest advancements in tele-health. The lack of broadband access for these private and public sectors have far reaching consequences to our rural communities for it reduces their opportunities for employment, reduces their quality of life, and stifles their potential for economic development.

A national strategy should place a priority emphasis on providing incentives and funding opportunities that target these specific sectors. These private and public institutions are capable of serving as anchor tenants for expanding broadband networks in rural communities. Connecting these institutions and sectors will directly benefit the lives of rural residents' while simultaneously reduce the costs to further provide residential broadband access. Furthermore, serving these anchor tenants as a means to establishing broadband networks in rural areas can yield additional benefits by providing first responders the ability to maintain interoperable communications in all parts of the country. Ultimately, for a national interoperable communications network to exist, broadband infrastructure must be accessible to reconcile the local, state, and federal communications systems.

Basic broadband service is no longer a luxury, but is a necessity and a national broadband plan should reflect this transformation as fundamentally important as electricity and water. While billions of private dollars have been invested in broadband across the country, and billions in additional public dollars will be invested in the coming years, some communities in the most rural areas may continue to lack broadband access in the future. Due to these instances, it is imperative that a national broadband policy addresses these unique cases and attempts to develop sustainable solutions around these very remote communities.

Lastly, a national broadband policy must recognize the need for reform of the Universal Service Fund (USF) that has been instrumental in bringing phone service to nearly every American. USF reform must be technology neutral and recognize that broadband should be a supported service and special efforts should be made to provide predictable, targeted support to achieve the final goal of universal service.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment on behalf of the bipartisan Congressional Rural Caucus. As your agency continues to develop the national broadband plan for our nation, our caucus stands ready to work with you to further our mutual goals of expanding broadband access to all corners of our nation.

Sincerely,

Rep. Bart Stupak

Rural Telecommunications Task Force  
Co-Chair

Rep. Lee Terry

Rural Telecommunications Task Force

Co-Chair

Travis W. Childers

Congressional Rural Caucus, Co-Chair

Adrian Smith

Congressional Rural Caucus, Co-Chair

Tim Walz

Congressional Rural Caucus, Co-Chair

Glenn Thompson

Congressional Rural Caucus, Co-Chair

cc: The Honorable Johnathon S. Adelstein  
The Honorable Robert M. McDowell

