

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 11, 2015

Secretary Thomas Vilsack
United States Department of Agriculture
Jamie L. Whitten Federal Building
1400 Independence Ave., SW, Room 200A
Washington, D.C. 20250

Assistant Secretary Lawrence E. Strickling
National Telecommunications & Information Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Assistant Secretary Strickling,

Thank you for your commitment to broadband deployment, adoption, and access. We write in response to your recent Broadband Opportunity Council Notice and Request for Comment (Docket No. 1540414365-5365-01). In your Request, you sought public comment on “What federal regulations and/or statutes could be modernized or adapted to promote broadband deployment and adoption?” We urge the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to modernize regulations for the Rural Utility Service’s (RUS) Telecommunications Infrastructure Loan and Loan Guarantee program to better facilitate high-speed rural broadband deployment. In particular, we ask that you update that program’s definitions of “reasonably adequate service” and ensure a broad spectrum of applicants is able to seek loan support.

The Federal Communication Commission’s January 2015 broadband progress report demonstrated that the digital divide between rural and urban America persists, and by some measures continues to grow. In total, 53% of rural America and 63% of those on Tribal land lack access to advanced broadband. As you are well aware, bringing greater Internet access to remote communities is critical to economic development, education, healthcare, safety, as well as cultural literacy.

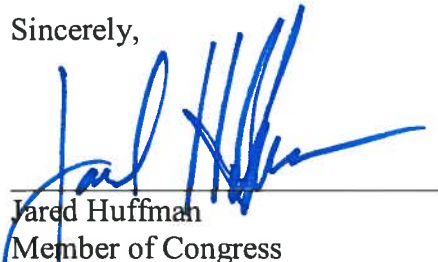
Over the past decade, RUS has increasingly utilized the Telecommunications Infrastructure Loan and Loan Guarantee program to provide rural communities with high-speed and dependable internet connections. In 2014 alone, RUS made hundreds of millions of dollars in loans and loan

guarantees available to support broadband deployment. The total telecommunications loan portfolio includes over \$4.4 billion for the purpose of delivering broadband and advanced telecommunications to rural communities.

While this is important work, technology continues to improve and consumer expectations have changed dramatically in recent years. We are concerned that existing definitions of “reasonably adequate service” hamper USDA’s ability to implement modern connection standards. Specifically, we believe that RUS standards should recognize significant improvements to upload and download speeds as well as mobile broadband technologies. For example, current regulations define “reasonably adequate service” as “transmission and reception of data at a rate of at least 1,000,000 bits per second (1Mbps)”, which most consumers, the FCC, and even other programs within USDA no longer consider reasonable broadband speeds. Updating these standards would better facilitate broadband deployment and encourage qualified borrowers to take advantage of this important program.

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter. We look forward to your prompt response to our request.

Sincerely,




Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress



Peter Welch
Member of Congress



Dave Loebsack
Member of Congress



Paul D. Tonko
Member of Congress



Derek Kilmer
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