
RURAL INTERNET AND BROADBAND POLICY GROUP

Rural Broadband Principles and Policy Recommendations

FEBRUARY 2009

Rural America and Broadband

Rural America is vast and diverse. Sixty million Americans, or about 20 percent of the population, live in the countryside on 80 percent of the nation's land. While such a large area belies easy characterization, nonmetropolitan areas do share a common set of concerns and features that bear directly on communications policy.

The predominant feature of rural areas is the land: mountains, plains, coastlines, deltas, and other geographic characteristics. Rural cultures and economies grow in response to place, and in rural areas place is defined by land. Rural areas are by definition geographically dispersed and less densely populated than urban areas, making delivery of public services more challenging. But the health of the nation as a whole is directly linked to the wellbeing of rural America. Rural America provides the food and natural resources upon which healthy cities rely, and urban areas are a primary market for rural goods. The United States cannot build a healthy economy without considering the interdependent nature of rural and urban areas. When America's rural communities lag behind, the entire nation feels the effects. Taken as a whole, America's rural communities are at risk. Rural Americans are far more likely to be poor, undereducated, sick, and prone to a range of maladies such as drug addiction, depression, and suicide. Of the 250 poorest American counties, 244 are rural.

Digital communications technology could be part of the solution for addressing these economic and social difficulties. Broadband access would allow rural America to reap the benefits of telehealth, telecommuting, higher education distance learning, improved emergency communications systems, and greater connection to the global economy. But rural America lags the rest of the nation in broadband penetration. Currently, the United States ranks 17th in broadband penetration. While the national penetration rate is 47 percent, a 2008 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project shows that less than a third of rural Americans have broadband in the home. While geography plays a large role in the lack of access, demographics also contribute to this disparity. Rural Americans tend to be poorer, have less formal education, and are older, all factors that correlate with reduced Internet usage. Policy obstacles also play a major role. The current market-driven policies for the build out of broadband do not adequately serve rural communities. After all, the federal government defines rural areas as regions lying outside metropolitan markets. Therefore, market-driven solutions for rural areas are problematic by definition.

Rural America needs broadband. We need an approach to broadband development with rural principles at its core. We need broadband to participate fully in the nation's democracy, economy, culture, and society. It is our responsibility to ensure that the new administration addresses the needs and builds upon the opportunities of all – and “all” includes rural America.

Goals

The Rural Internet and Broadband Policy Group has two goals: 1) to articulate national broadband policies that provide opportunities for rural communities to participate fully in the nation's democracy, economy, culture, and society, and 2) to spark national collaboration among rural broadband advocates.

Rural Principles

Our diverse experiences with broadband in rural areas yielded observations about the challenges and opportunities rural communities face. In turn, these observations served as the foundation for the principles we uphold in articulating broadband and internet policies for rural America.

Principles

1) Communication as a fundamental human right.

Lack of access to broadband denies rural areas the fundamental human right to communicate. Without broadband, rural communities are further isolated from the new model of economic and civic participation, thus, diminishing antipoverty efforts. Economic distress in rural communities – lack of jobs, inadequate education, poor healthcare, outflow of local talent, etc. – is exacerbated by the inability to communicate. Broadband is no longer a luxury but a vital service necessary to fully participate in the nation’s democracy, economy, culture, and society. As the nation moves forward in new ways with advanced digital communications, broadband access becomes a fundamental human right. Observing and protecting this right will provide more resources for rural areas to improve economic conditions and advance with the rest of the nation.

2) Diversity of rural America.

Rural America is diverse in terrains, cultures, foods, peoples, and knowledge. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for all rural communities. Therefore, the diversity of rural America must be represented in national broadband policies. Tribal lands are an example of the diverse needs of rural areas. Tribal sovereignty includes the right of each Native Nation to govern relationships and territory within tribal homelands. The unique concerns of tribal lands place them in a position to act as the model for broadband development success. As with each tribe, each rural community has its own network of knowledge. The diverse knowledges of rural communities must be protected with policies that support locally produced content and adequate data collection methods that respect of the peculiarities of each locality.

3) Local ownership, self reliance, and investment in place.

Absentee-ownership of broadband infrastructure and service has failed to serve rural communities. Absentee corporations have sometimes failed to invest in rural infrastructure because they fear rural areas will not return profits available from wealthier, more densely populated markets. National broadband policies must prioritize local ownership in rural communities, thus encouraging self reliance and investment in place. Local ownership would address problems ignored by absentee-owners such as lack of broadband access, slow speeds, limited (if any) provider choice, and aggregation of demand. By definition, the market-based model fails rural because rural is considered to be outside of the market. Rural communities must own local communications infrastructure, not only to boost their local economies, but to ensure that broadband is accessible to rural and every community in the nation.

4) Network neutrality

Rural areas generally have less access to all forms of media, not just broadband. Therefore, net neutrality, which establishes the principle of unfiltered access to information, is vitally important for rural communities.

Policy Recommendations

Participants agreed upon several recommendations that the administration must consider as priority when developing a national broadband strategy. The proposed recommendations are based on four main needs of rural communities: 1) accurate data on service availability and adoption, 2) locally-owned infrastructure, 3) assistance in technology adoption, and 4) uniform and transparent federal policies.

Policies for adequate data:

1) Broadband Data Improvement Act 2008

We support the Broadband Data Improvement Act as a vehicle for obtaining adequate broadband accessibility data from rural areas. We know that access to broadband is more limited in rural areas than in metropolitan areas, but we do not know precise and comprehensive statistics on the state of broadband infrastructure, access, cost, and adoption in rural communities. In an effort to obtain adequate data, we recommend the administration addresses three issues:

- a. Change the zip code method of defining where broadband service exists. This method does not reveal the true availability of broadband to residences and businesses in rural areas and can lead to poor policy decisions.
- b. Consider modeling efforts on locally-driven broadband data collection projects such as Native Public Media's "Blue Print Project."
- c. All data on available speeds must be based on actual, not advertised availability, and also be accompanied by cost of service.

2) Change the FCC's definition of broadband speed.

The current broadband data transmission speed, as defined by the FCC, is 768 kilobits per second. To reap the benefits of advanced communications, we need more ambitious speed goals. We recommend the minimum speed of broadband to be, even at times of peak usage, 3 Megabytes per second for download, and 1 Megabyte per second for upload.

3) Federally-funded transportation projects data base.

A national data base of federally-funded transportation projects should be created. This would allow broadband providers to view upcoming construction projects and be given an opportunity to lay fiber during the construction phase, decreasing both broadband system construction costs and public disturbance to right-of-way.

Policies for infrastructure ownership & development:

1) Universal Service Fund

While we await Universal Service Fund reform, the administration should do a one-time Transfer of Funds totaling five billion dollars out of USF for shovel-ready projects. We recommend projects that have a history of prioritizing rural communities to be re-funded via this transfer.

2) Broadband as a lifeline service

Broadband is no longer a luxury but a vital service necessary to fully participate in the nation's democracy, economy, culture, and society. The administration should fund broadband as a lifeline service that must be made available to all citizens.

3) Incentives should be created to encourage local and public ownership. For example, local providers, Tribal governments, community-based nonprofits, utilities, and co-ops should get incentives to construct, own, improve, maintain, and operate broadband facilities and to provide broadband services.

4) Middle Mile

The administration should provide funding for building middle mile infrastructure in underserved and unserved areas, and ensure that this infrastructure is open and publicly owned.

5) Funding should be made available for publicly-owned towers and infrastructure in remote unserved areas.

6) Spectrum

a. White Spaces – The administration should support policy that opens unused TV spectrum and makes it available to local and public service providers.

b. Federal Bandwidth –The FCC should consider allowing the use of underused spectrum set aside for federal agencies for data transmission and digital communications by local and public service providers.

7) Network Neutrality

Rural areas generally have less access to all forms of media, not just broadband. Therefore, net neutrality, which establishes the principle of unfiltered access to information, is vitally important for rural communities.

Policies for adoption of technology:

- 1) Funding should be made available for technology training, production, and adoption in communities historically at the margins of technology such as rural, low-income, immigrant, and communities of color. We recommend the administration fund efforts and programs by agencies with a track record of contributing to these communities.

Policies for uniform and transparent federal broadband deployment:

- 1) Designating one federal agency lead coordinator for implementing the Federal Broadband Policy to help ensure cohesion, speed, and efficiency.
- 2) Establishing a pricing policy for private companies paying for “rights-of-way” access to federal property.

- 3) Calling for uniform, expedited rights-of-way permitting procedures to accelerate broadband deployment.

Participants

Participants joined the meeting at the Drawbridge Inn in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky in person or via conference call.

In attendance:

Harold Feld, Media Access Project;
Camille Lacapa, Native Public Media;
Mimi Pickering, Appalshop;
Tammy Ko Robinson, Main Street Project;
Connie Stewart, California Center for Rural Policy;
John Hoag, Ohio University;
Chance Williams, Media and Democracy Coalition;
Edyael Casaperalta, Center for Rural Strategies;
Tim Marema, Center for Rural Strategies;
Marty Newell (facilitator), Center for Rural Strategies

Via Conference Call:

Amalia Anderson, Main Street Project;
Geoffrey Blackwell, Chikasaw Nation Industries Inc.;
Wally Bowen, Mountain Area Information Network;
Brian Dabson, Rural Policy Research Institute;
Christopher Mitchell, Institute for Local Self Reliance;
Sean McLaughlin, Access Humboldt;
Loris Taylor, Native Public Media