



Kickstarting 2018: A Focus on Rural Access

January 12, 2018

January has seen a flurry of activity around rural broadband access in America, with the signing of an Executive Order and Presidential Memorandum to expand broadband deployment in rural areas, the unveiling of a Rural Prosperity Task Force report prioritizing rural access, and the Federal Communications Commission's announcing next steps for the Connect America Fund Phase II Auction—all taking place this week.

Furthermore, a federal infrastructure package is touted to drop early this year and Governors across the country are likely to express their commitment to expanding high-speed internet in a number of State of the State addresses in the coming weeks. One such example occurred on Tuesday in Iowa, where Governor Kim Reynolds delivered her Condition of the State speech and announced a new initiative to bring technology opportunities to rural Iowa, stating that this new initiative will “promote investment and connect rural Iowa by expanding broadband capabilities in every corner of our state. Our goal: to keep and bring home Iowa’s sons and daughters and grow the next generation of community leaders.”

With leaders across America joining the cause of ubiquitous broadband, Connected Nation continues to closely track developments in our effort to support these endeavors. A few of these key activities that took place this week are outlined in this policy brief.

White House Activity on Rural Access

Rural Prosperity Report

In April 2017, President Trump established by [Executive Order 13790](#) the Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity, chaired by Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue. The Task Force set out to understand the barriers to rural prosperity and agricultural productivity and to develop a report on these issues with relevant recommendations. Task Force members include FCC Chairman Ajit Pai, Director of the Office of Management and Budget Mick Mulvaney, Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, and a number of other high ranking agency representatives. The Task Force has a [website](#) hosted by the Department of Agriculture, and asks for comment, particularly on ways the federal government can reduce red tape and burdensome regulations in rural America.

On Monday, at an address by President Trump to the American Farm Bureau Federation's 2018 convention, the Report¹ was released which outlined five key recommendations for rural prosperity:²



1. **e-Connectivity for Rural America:** Reliable and affordable high-speed internet connectivity will transform rural America as a key catalyst for prosperity.
2. **Improving Quality of Life:** Modern utilities, affordable housing, efficient transportation, and reliable employment are economic indicators that must be integrated with social indicators like access to medical services, public safety, education, and community resilience to empower rural communities to thrive.
3. **Rural Workforce:** Providing rural communities, organizations, and businesses with a skilled workforce in an environment where people can thrive will grow prosperous communities.
4. **Harnessing Technological Innovation:** Technology can increase crop yields; improve crop quality, nutritional value, and food safety; and enhance work efficiency and safety. At the core of these developments is the expansion of STEM education, research, regulatory modernization, and infrastructure.

¹ <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/rural-prosperity-report.pdf>

² Image Source: Rural Prosperity Task Force Website: <https://www.usda.gov/ruralprosperity>

5. **Economic Development:** By promoting innovative farm technologies, energy security, recreation, agritourism, and sustainable forest management, communities will be empowered to leverage the bounties of rural America. Investing in rural transportation infrastructure is needed for carrying more “Made in America” products to markets at home and abroad, and boosting our country’s global competitiveness. Reducing regulatory burdens and attracting private capital will support our ultimate mission of empowering Rural America to feed the world.

Executive Orders

Just following the release of the Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity’s Report, President Trump addressed the American Farm Bureau Federation Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, on Monday afternoon. In his speech, President Trump stated that he would “take the first step to expand access to broadband Internet in rural America so you can compete on a level playing field, which you were not able to do” and that he would “sign two presidential orders to provide broader and faster and better Internet coverage.”³

Executive Order 13821,⁴ which President Trump signed on Monday, commits to “use all viable tools to accelerate the deployment and adoption of affordable, reliable, modern high-speed broadband connectivity in rural America” which includes reducing barriers to investment, removing obstacles to broadband services, and more efficiently employing government resources. The Order calls for the development of common forms and contracts for wireless facility sitings on buildings and property owned by the federal government.

In a concurrent Presidential Memorandum,⁵ the White House seeks “to make federal assets more available for rural broadband deployment, with due consideration of national security concerns.” Specifically, the Memorandum calls for the Secretary of the Interior to develop plans to support the development and adoption of rural broadband by increasing access to tower facilities and other infrastructure assets managed by the Department of the Interior. The Memorandum sets up a timeline of 180 days for the Secretary to report to the Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy the DOI’s progress in identifying assets that can be used to support rural broadband deployment and adoption.

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-american-farm-bureau-annual-convention-nashville-tn/>

⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-executive-order-streamlining-expediting-requests-locate-broadband-facilities-rural-america/>

⁵ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-secretary-interior/>

FCC Activity on Connect America Fund Phase II

On Tuesday, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai [announced items tentatively on the agenda](#) for the FCC's January Open Meeting scheduled for Tuesday, January 30. Included in this agenda is the Connect America Fund Phase II (CAF II) Auction.

The Commission will consider an Order and Order on Reconsideration⁶ around the remaining issues raised by challenges to the Commission's orders implementing the CAF II auction, "in which service providers will compete to receive support of up to \$1.98 billion to offer voice and broadband service in unserved high-cost areas" over ten years. The Commission will also consider a Public Notice⁷ establishing procedures for the CAF II auction. According to Chairman Pai, the Public Notice is "the last significant hurdle before the Phase II auction can get underway."⁸

Just before the holidays, the FCC released a list of CAF II eligible areas,⁹ and, according to Wireline Adviser Jay Schwarz, the FCC is aiming to launch the auction this coming July.¹⁰

Capitol Hill

The U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives did not sit on the broadband policy sidelines this week.

President Trump signed into law H.R. 2331, the [Connected Government Act](#), which requires by statute that federal websites intended for public use be functional on mobile devices.

The U.S. Senate passed [S. 875](#), which will require a study and analysis of requirements the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC) places on recipients of Universal Service Fund (USF) subsidies, including the Connect America Fund, the Lifeline Program, the E-rate Program, the Rural Health Care Program, the CAF Mobility Fund, and the CAF Remote Areas Fund. The intent of the bill and the resulting study is to reduce duplicative and onerous filing requirements that may not be necessary to ensure an absence of waste, fraud, and abuse in these programs.

On Thursday, the House Committee on Energy & Commerce [released four principles for broadband infrastructure](#). Led by Subcommittee on Communications and Technology Chairman Marsha Blackburn (R-TN), the Committee's Republican members intend to use these principles to guide any broadband legislation they consider. The principles include:

⁶ http://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2018/db0109/DOC-348631A1.pdf

⁷ http://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2018/db0109/DOC-348634A1.pdf

⁸ <https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/blog/2018/01/09/happy-and-productive-new-year>

⁹ <https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/maps/caf2-auction-final-areas/>

¹⁰ http://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2018/db0108/DOC-348606A1.pdf

- A resolution introduced by Rep. Leonard Lance (R-NJ) that seeks “to direct broadband infrastructure funding toward areas that are currently unserved.”
- A resolution introduced by Rep. Bob Latta (R-OH) that seeks “to ensure federal policy treats all broadband providers in a technology-neutral manner, applying consistent rules that support innovation.”
- A resolution introduced by Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC) that seeks “to ensure wireless broadband infrastructure preference for states that support small cell siting reform, helping ease the permitting process in communities across the country.”
- A resolution introduced by Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) that seeks “to ensure federal, state, and local tax, regulatory, permitting, and other requirements are coordinated and reconciled to maximize the benefits of broadband investment.”

FCC Commissioner Brendan Carr [released a statement](#) on Thursday praising the Committee’s principles. Carr’s brief statement is quoted below in its entirety:

“I commend the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology, chaired by Representative Marsha Blackburn, for its leadership in promoting broadband infrastructure deployment. As the four resolutions introduced today by Vice Chairman Leonard Lance, Chairman Bob Latta, Representative Richard Hudson, and Representative Gus Bilirakis recognize, broadband is key to job creation and economic growth. So I applaud Chairman Blackburn and the Subcommittee for their continued focus on removing barriers to broadband buildout. These efforts will ensure that all Americans—regardless of where they live—can benefit from next-generation technologies.”

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