

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4502

February 10, 2016

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Rural America continues to lag behind the rest of the country when it comes to broadband deployment. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently adopted its annual Broadband Progress Report, which shows a striking disparity in the quality of service available in urban versus rural areas. There is no doubt that the FCC has set an aggressive speed standard by which to measure progress, but considering that 92 percent of urban Americans have access to the FCC's baseline speed, it is not out of line with what is being widely offered today. In contrast, only 53 percent of rural Americans have access to this standard. Regardless of the baseline speed standard used, the data shows that rural areas are underserved by virtually any measure.

Last year, I worked to include language in the report accompanying the Fiscal Year 2016 Agriculture Appropriations bill emphasizing the importance of the Farm Bill's broadband loan program. This language, which was successfully carried over by the final omnibus appropriations package, directed the Department to expedite implementation of the broadband provisions of the Agriculture Act of 2014, particularly with respect to the authority included in the Act to raise the minimum speed standard that determines funding eligibility under the program. The Farm Bill gave the Department of Agriculture authority to review and raise the minimum speed standard at least once every two years. I write today to underscore the importance of this measure and urge you to expeditiously review the existing speed standard for the program and take appropriate steps to raise it.

In the two years since the Agriculture Act of 2014 was enacted, Americans' broadband habits have changed. In 2016, it is not unusual to connect multiple smartphones, tablets, laptops, game consoles, and video streaming devices to one household broadband connection. The largest broadband providers in the country market their speeds to consumers based on the number of devices they expect to connect. For example, Comcast suggests download speeds of 25 megabits per second (Mbps) for households with 2-3 connected devices.¹ In the face of these changing habits, a review of the Farm Bill's speed standard is warranted to determine whether it should be raised as authorized by the bill.

¹ <http://www.xfinity.com/internet-service.html>

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Broadband is also a key tool for economic empowerment in rural communities. Rural areas like Vermont are home to small, home-based businesses and start-ups that simply would not exist without broadband access. Comcast suggests 16 Mbps download for start-up businesses and 25 Mbps download for home-based and small business use.² A speed standard for rural America should reflect what is necessary for these businesses and start-ups to grow and compete. Rural America cannot thrive if entrepreneurs have to leave for urban centers in order to access the tools needed to start or grow their businesses.

I appreciate the work the Department has done to improve broadband access in rural areas, but there is more that needs to be done. Working together, we can set rural America on a path to broadband equality. I urge you to use your authority to review and appropriately raise the Farm Bill broadband loan program's minimum speed standard.

Sincerely,

PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator

² <http://business2.comcast.com/internet/business-internet>