

June 28, 2016

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to you today regarding the Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee Program (Broadband Loan Program) and the Community Connect Grant Program (Community Connect Program). Both of these important programs are a part of the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) within the Department of Agriculture (USDA). These initiatives provide much-needed support for enhancing broadband infrastructure in rural America, and we believe USDA can further enhance the impact of these programs by making eligibility adjustments that are within the authority delegated to you by Congress. In order to maintain the programs' relevance in an age of rapidly increasing demand for bandwidth, **we strongly urge you to consider updating their broadband speed definitions, particularly the Community Connect Program's Minimum Broadband Service benchmark.**

Broadband access is a vital link to a range of necessary services and resources for America's rural residents. Not only is it an economic development tool for businesses that may be isolated from potential customers and employees, but it broadens educational horizons for students and offers healthcare providers flexible and cost-effective care-delivery approaches. Businesses, students, and patients are taking advantage of these connectivity-enabled opportunities, which have been facilitated by innovative tools in videoconferencing, distance learning, in-home health monitoring, and telemedicine, among other areas. As use of these services increases and drives growth in IP traffic—Cisco projects a 20 percent compound annual growth rate in the volume of IP traffic in the US through 2019 —federal policymakers must ensure that taxpayer-supported infrastructure is sufficiently robust to handle demand. It is not only a matter of fairness that rural Americans can fully utilize broadband-enabled resources, but also a matter of ensuring that taxpayers are receiving the full economic development return on their investments.

In order to keep USDA's broadband infrastructure programs in step with current needs, Congress has delegated to USDA the ability to update speed definitions within both the Broadband Loan Program and the Community Connect Program. **We therefore respectfully request that for future funding years you increase the Community Connect Program's Minimum Broadband Service definition.** Such a change will enable communities that are currently ineligible, but which nonetheless lack adequate service, to engage with RUS and providers to improve their connectivity. We also strongly encourage you to coordinate such changes with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) because that agency's universal service programs are an important partner and complement to the work of USDA – it is essential that as USDA updates its speed definition, the FCC must ensure that its universal service programs keep pace.

Thank you for your attention to this request. We look forward to working with you as USDA continues the very important management of the Community Connect Grant Program and Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee Program.

Sincerely,



Rep. Peter Welch
Member of Congress



Rep. Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Rep. Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Rep. Greg Walden
Member of Congress



Rep. Anna Eshoo
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Rep. Mike Bost
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Rep. Cheri Bustos
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Rep. Kevin Cramer
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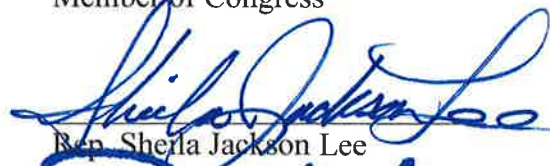
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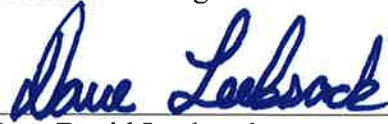
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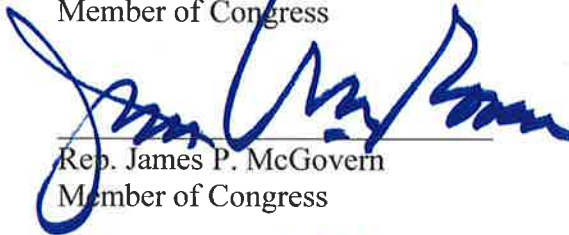
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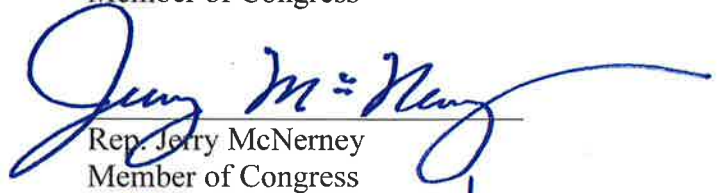
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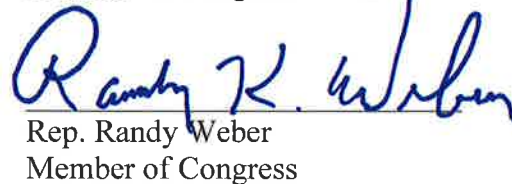
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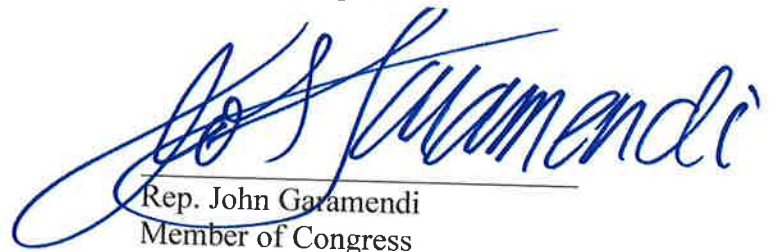
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