

Removing Barriers to Connecting Communities

Congress should act now to standardize and streamline permitting for fiber deployment.

With a historic investment of government and private sector funds in broadband on the horizon, Congress should move quickly to remove barriers to broadband deployment. All policies should be viewed through the lens of connecting communities—from expedited permitting to relief from legacy obligations to make way for network modernization, to pole attachment rules that promote collaboration and coordination. Congress should chart a clear and collaborative infrastructure policy course that encourages all to invest with confidence in our nation's broadband future.

PERMITTING REFORM IN CONJUNCTION WITH NEXT GENERATION TECHNOLOGIES

Permitting delays and denials impede network providers from deploying broadband in a cost-effective and timely way. To prepare for the influx of broadband builds enabled by BEAD projects, Congress should act now to standardize and streamline permitting for fiber deployment on federal lands. Quick and decisive action will accelerate broadband deployment and prevent added costs due to unnecessary delays.

INTERAGENCY BROADBAND COORDINATION

For decades, there has been little to no coordination among different Executive Branch agencies that offer meaningful broadband support programs. While all agencies should be working together toward the shared goal of universal broadband connectivity, the USDA, the FCC, and various stimulus grants over the years have often appeared to compete with one another.

Coordination requirements ensure the efficient allocation of broadband funds, avoiding funding duplications and moving us closer to 100 percent connectivity. While the interagency coordination directives in The Broadband Interagency Coordination Act of 2020 are a step in the right direction, they fall short of the binding requirements needed to ensure all federal broadband programs are working in concert. Congress should pass legislation that requires any federal government agency administering such a program to certify that no other federal or state broadband dollars have been awarded to a project area before awarding new funds.

In addition, states should be required to report where they've made awards of funding soon after that funding is allocated, well before a project's completion. This will help avoid federal-state overbuilding that diverts funding from truly unserved and underserved locations.

Requiring all government broadband programs to base funding allocations on the FCC's broadband maps can help break the decades-long cycle of overbuilding to ensure that the hardest-to-reach communities are finally connected.

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REMOVE THE TAX ON BROADBAND GRANTS

Congress allocated approximately \$42 billion through the BEAD program to move us toward 100% connectivity. However, carriers awarded BEAD and other broadband grants will have to return approximately 21% of those grants in the form of federal taxes. A 21% tax reduction means as many as one in every five broadband projects cannot be built, which essentially assures BEAD will fall well short of its 100% connectivity goal. Carriers are planning now, evaluating potential broadband project bids based on a number of factors, including supply chain availability, labor costs, permitting impediments, and matching projects with available funds. To ensure as many Americans as possible are connected, Congress must act soon to make clear that BEAD and other federal broadband grant program funds should remain in the communities they aim to serve—rather than be taxed back to Washington.

ADVANCING BEAD: BREAKING BARRIERS TO BROADBAND EXPANSION

The \$42.5 billion BEAD rural broadband program is a once in a generation opportunity to connect unserved and underserved communities across America. However, the success of the program hinges on states having the flexibility to design plans that best meet their needs and timely federal approval of state plans.