

April 20, 2026

The Honorable Brooke L. Rollins
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins,

On behalf of USTelecom, I am writing to commend the Department of Agriculture's continued leadership in advancing broadband deployment in rural America and to highlight an important opportunity to further streamline permitting consistent with recent White House guidance.

As you know, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) recently issued updated guidance on the use of categorical exclusions (CEs) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This guidance encourages agencies to expand the use of CEs for activities that do not have significant environmental impacts and reinforces agencies' authority under Section 109 of NEPA to adopt categorical exclusions established by other federal agencies. Council on Environmental Quality Chair Katherine Scarlett said, "It should never take longer to permit a critical infrastructure project than it takes to build it."

We appreciate that USDA—particularly through the Rural Utilities Service (RUS)—has already taken important steps to modernize its NEPA processes and facilitate broadband deployment, including leveraging categorical exclusions for routine infrastructure activities. Building on this progress, we respectfully request that the Department continue to expand and standardize the use of categorical exclusions across its programs—particularly through broader adoption of Department of Commerce (DOC) and National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) broadband-related CEs where appropriate.

Formal adoption of these CEs—especially those covering installation of communications infrastructure within existing rights-of-way, equipment replacements, and upgrades—would further streamline reviews, reduce duplication, and improve coordination across federal agencies. This would help ensure that USDA-supported broadband projects can move forward more quickly.

Included below is a list of categorical exclusions established by various agencies that USDA should consider and adopt. These CEs align closely with the types of broadband activities supported through USDA programs and offer a practical path to accelerate deployment in rural and underserved communities.

USTelecom has worked closely with the White House, including CEQ, to advance policies that support more efficient and predictable permitting processes. The recent guidance reflects these

shared priorities, and its effective implementation across agencies like USDA will be critical to realizing its full benefits.

We stand ready to work with you and your team to support this effort and to ensure that broadband deployment proceeds efficiently while maintaining strong environmental stewardship.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jonathan Spalter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

Jonathan Spalter

cc:

Todd Lindsey, Acting Under Secretary for Rural Development

Karl Elmshaeuser, Administrator of the Rural Utilities Service (RUS)

Tom Schultz, Chief of the USDA Forest Service

Katherine Scarlett, Director of the Council on Environmental Quality

Categorical Exclusion (CE)	Reason for USDA Adoption / Relevance
FirstNet B.3 – Construction of buried and aerial telecommunications lines, cables, and related facilities	USDA (RUS and Forest Service) already supports similar activities; adopting NTIA C-8 would provide a more consistent, government-wide framework and reduce variability across programs and field offices.
NTIA C-8 – Use of existing rights-of-way for communications systems (fiber, cable, etc.)	Would further streamline fiber deployment across USDA-supported projects by aligning RUS and Forest Service processes with a uniform, cross-agency standard for use of existing ROWs.
NTIA C-4 – Facilities supporting communications systems on previously disturbed land with ≤1 acre disturbance	Would create a consistent, broadband-focused standard for deploying huts, switching stations, and support infrastructure across USDA broadband programs.
NTIA C-6 – Temporary facilities on previously disturbed land with ≤1 acre disturbance	Supports efficient deployment logistics (e.g., staging, testing) for USDA-funded broadband projects with minimal environmental impact, improving project timelines.
FirstNet B.4 – Changes to existing lines with <20% pole replacement / rebuild within existing ROW	Aligns with USDA’s existing upgrade and maintenance activities; adopting NTIA C-5/C-8 concepts would provide clearer, more consistent pathways for routine modernization.
FirstNet B.7 – Changes or additions to telecom facilities with <1 acre new disturbance	Closely mirrors NTIA C-4; adoption would improve consistency across USDA programs and provide clearer guidance for small-scale broadband infrastructure in rural areas.
FirstNet B.12 – Relocation of telecom lines due to road/highway work	USDA currently addresses similar scenarios; pairing with NTIA C-8 would enable more proactive deployment, not just relocation tied to other infrastructure projects.
FirstNet B.13 – Upgrades to existing telecom facilities	Consistent with USDA’s support for infrastructure upgrades; NTIA-aligned CEs would standardize and streamline approvals across RUS and Forest Service activities.

Categorical Exclusion (CE)	Reason for USDA Adoption / Relevance
Commerce A-2 – New construction in developed/disturbed areas (with limits)	Reinforces NTIA C-4 approach; supports small-footprint broadband facilities in rural communities with clearer siting criteria and reduced permitting variability.
Commerce A-7 – Acquisition, installation, operation, and removal of communications systems/equipment	Supports efficient deployment and lifecycle management of telecom equipment in USDA-funded projects; reduces administrative and permitting friction.
Commerce A-6 – Adding fiber to transmission structures or burying fiber in existing transmission line ROWs	Directly aligns with NTIA C-8 and USDA-supported fiber deployment; would streamline installation along existing utility corridors and reduce duplicative review.
Commerce A-10 – Siting or modification of support buildings and structures within or contiguous to an already developed area	Reinforces NTIA C-4 approach; enables efficient deployment or expansion of small support facilities (e.g., huts, switching stations) with minimal environmental impact, reducing permitting delays for USDA-funded projects.