

**Before the
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Telecommunications and Information Administration**

In the Matter of)
)
Improving the Quality and Accuracy of) **Docket No. 180427421-8421-01**
Broadband Availability Data)

**COMMENTS OF
NATIONAL RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION**

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (“NRECA”) hereby submits its Comments in response to the Department of Commerce’s and National Telecommunications and Information Administration’s (“NTIA’s”) Request for Public Comment on its proposal “to collect broadband availability data at a more granular level than that available via the FCC Form 477 process.” (the “Request”).¹ The Request is in furtherance of NTIA’s Congressional directive “to acquire and display available third-party data sets to the extent it is able to negotiate its inclusion to augment data from the FCC, other federal government agencies, state government, and the private sector.”²

INTRODUCTION

NRECA is the national service organization for more than 900 not-for-profit rural electric cooperatives that provide electric energy to approximately 42 million people in 47 states or approximately 12 percent of electric customers, including 327 of the Nation's 353 "persistent poverty counties" (93%). Of the 42 million Americans served by cooperatives, an estimated 4 million live in persistent poverty counties. Rural electric cooperatives serve 88% of counties of

¹ 83 FR 53852, at 53853.

² *Id.*, at 53852; and, *see* Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, Public Law 115-141, Division B, Title I, 132 Stat. 348.

the United States. Rural electric cooperatives were formed to provide safe, reliable electric service to their member-owners at the lowest reasonable cost. Rural electric cooperatives are dedicated to improving the communities in which they serve, and the management and staff of rural electric cooperatives are active in rural economic development efforts. Electric cooperatives are private, not-for-profit entities that are owned and governed by the members to whom they deliver electricity. Electric cooperatives are democratically governed and operate according to the seven Cooperative Principles.³

NRECA and its members are intensely interested in the deployment of advanced telecommunications capabilities within the rural communities and areas in which electric cooperatives provide electric service.⁴ In many of our members' communities, incumbent service providers do not offer fixed broadband service that meets the current fixed broadband benchmark of 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload. NRECA estimates at least 6.3 million households in electric co-op service areas lack high-speed internet access. These rural families and businesses are fighting an uphill battle in the digital economy. New research shows that a lack of rural broadband to those unserved co-op households leads to \$68 billion in lost economic value over 20 years.⁵ This reality has prompted many electric cooperatives to undertake the investments and commit the resources to deploy fixed broadband services within these communities. Over 100 NRECA members provide fixed broadband service today, deploying fiber-based, fixed wireless or combined fiber and fixed wireless technologies. Forty-two (42) rural electric cooperatives

³ The seven Cooperative Principles are: Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic Member Control, Members' Economic Participation, Autonomy and Independence, Education, Training and Information, Cooperation Among Cooperatives, and Concern for Community.

⁴ NRECA and its members are focused principally on fixed broadband service.

⁵ See "Unlocking the Value of Broadband for Electric Cooperative Consumer-Members," NRECA Business & Technology Report, September 2018, available at: https://www.cooperative.com/programs-services/bts/Documents/Reports/Unlocking-the-Value-of-Broadband-for-Co-op-Consumer-Members_Sept_2018.pdf (last visited Dec. 20, 2018).

participated in the Connect America Phase II auction. Twenty-two (22) members formed a consortium and were deemed qualified to bid in the auction, along with twenty (20) other rural electric cooperatives. Thirty-one (31) cooperatives (including members in the consortium) were the winning bidders, securing \$225,222,405.33 in support over ten years.

We reasonably believe electric cooperative participation would have been higher, but for the FCC's approach to designating areas eligible for the auction. The FCC relies solely on FCC Form 477 data to determine broadband service availability, finding Census blocks with any service available as ineligible.⁶ Accordingly, NRECA has a strong interest in developing a systematic, broadband mapping approach that discloses either actual or planned broadband locations, principally in rural areas and, preferably, based on the current 25/3 Mbps fixed broadband benchmark.

COMMENTS

NRECA strongly supports NTIA's proposal to collect data at a more granular level than data collected in the FCC Form 477. FCC Form 477 collects data at the Census block level, instructing service providers to report as served any Census block in which *any* homes or businesses are served by the service provider.⁷ Members of NRECA have seen firsthand that this can lead to Census blocks being considered "served" when a substantial majority of the locations in a Census block is not served. As NRECA previously commented, "[o]ne Iowa electric cooperative whose electric service area is mostly rural farmland was stunned to learn the FCC

⁶ See *Connect America Fund; A National Broadband Plan for Our Future; Establishing Just and Reasonable Rates for Local Exchange Carriers; High-Cost Universal Service Support; Developing a Unified Intercarrier Compensation Regime; Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service; Lifeline and Link-Up; Universal Service Reform -- Mobility Fund*; WC Docket Nos. 10-90, 07-135, 05-337, 03-109, CC Docket Nos. 01-92, 96-45, GN Docket No. 09-51, WT Docket No. 10-208, Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 26 FCC Rcd 17663 (2011) (*USF/ICC Transformation Order and/or FNPRM*).

⁷ See 83 FR 53852, at 53853; and see "FCC Form 477 Local Telephone and Broadband Reporting Instructions," Federal Communications Commission, available at: <https://transition.fcc.gov/form477/477inst.pdf> (last visited Dec. 19, 2018).

considered the vast majority of its electric service area as being ‘served.’”⁸ NRECA firmly supports all efforts made by NTIA to develop a more complete and accurate depiction of broadband availability, especially in rural areas.

Geographic Information Systems Data Requirement. In order to provide an accurate depiction of coverage, NRECA supports a requirement for service providers to submit “[d]ata in a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) format that describe (a) wireless coverage areas based on a propagation model and (b) network infrastructure (such as fiber optic routes)”⁹ Mapping by service providers of their coverage is likely to provide the most accurate depiction of broadband availability. NRECA recommends that service providers be required to submit GIS data to show areas they currently provide service as well as those they are committed to serve. Including “committed to serve” areas would provide a more complete and long-term picture of broadband availability. Also, if this information is used by the FCC to determine eligibility for broadband funding, inclusion of such areas as “served” would promote the FCC’s policy of providing support in the most efficient manner possible.¹⁰

The provision of mapping data by service providers would directly support NTIA in meeting its Congressional directive to update the national broadband availability map.¹¹ Other types of location data would require additional resources to compile and convert the format into GIS data. Additionally, mapping data is less likely to contain Personally Identifiable

⁸ Comments of NRECA, *Improving the Quality and Accuracy of Broadband Availability Data*, NTIA Docket No. 180427421-8421-01, at 4 (filed Jul. 16, 2018) (“NRECA Comments”) (referencing Sam Bloch, *The FCC says all of Iowa has access to broadband internet. Speed tests tell a different story*, New Food Economy, June 20, 2018 <https://newfoodeconomy.org/rural-iowa-broadband-data-fcc/> (last visited on July 16, 2018 (analysis of internet speeds in some rural Iowa counties were well below what the FCC’s broadband map released in December 2017 and updated in February 2018 (setting the eligible areas for CAF II competitive auction) foreclosing these areas from the CAF II auction.))

⁹ 83 FR 53852, at 53853.

¹⁰ See *USF/ICC Transformation Order and/or FNPRM*, at 17663, para. 1.

¹¹ See Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, Public Law 115-141, Division B, Title I, 132 Stat. 348.

Information (PII) than other types of location data, such as addresses. This could assist in lightening the burden on providers as they would not have to remove PII before submitting their data.

Verification, Completeness, and Accuracy. Regardless of the type of data collected, NRECA strongly supports NTIA developing procedures to verify data to ensure accuracy.¹² Collecting data from sources beyond service providers, such as industry associations, data aggregators, and researchers that study or analyze broadband availability, will aid in collecting complete and accurate information.¹³ These sources will provide checks on the data provided by service providers, adding a level of verification to the process.

In the event that no data is reported for a particular area, NRECA recommends NTIA deem the area as “unserved” for the purposes of broadband availability data. NRECA believes it is more harmful to err on the side of an area being “served” rather than “unserved”, as it minimizes the likelihood of unserved areas being deemed ineligible for the funding necessary to obtain broadband service. This policy would also incentivize providers to thoroughly report the served and unserved locations in their service areas, increasing the completeness and accuracy of data collected.

Education and Assistance. NRECA emphasizes the importance of education of and assistance for service providers once NTIA settles on a data collection policy. Prior to the new data collection process taking effect, NTIA must establish an educational program for service providers that clearly explains what data must be submitted and how it must be submitted. NRECA recommends a webinar or series of webinars so that service providers can attend

¹² FCC Form 477 does not include any sort of verification process, but instead relies solely on data as reported from service providers.

¹³ 83 FR 53852, at 53853.

remotely, but still interact with NTIA staff and ask questions. The FCC provides an extensive catalog of instructional resources for FCC Form 477.¹⁴ Because NTIA’s objective is to collect data on a more granular level than FCC Form 477, it is likely to be more complex than the Form; therefore, it is vital that proper instruction to service providers be available.

Additionally, it is imperative that NTIA provide assistance to smaller entities that may not have the same capabilities as larger service providers. For example, while many service providers may have maps and GIS data readily available, smaller, more rural providers may not. NTIA should assist smaller entities by making available the software and technical capabilities needed in order for those entities to meet data collection requirements. Through ensuring that all service providers understand the data requirements and have the capability to meet the data requirements, NTIA will ensure that the broadband available data collected is as complete and accurate as possible.

CONCLUSION

NRECA strongly supports the efforts of NTIA to update the national broadband availability map with an accurate depiction of broadband availability. NTIA’s objective of “identify[ing] regions of the country with insufficient broadband capacity, particularly in rural areas” hits very close to home for NRECA and its members. NRECA believes that through requiring mapping data, verifying the data to ensure completeness and accuracy, and educating and assisting service providers in the data collection process, NTIA will be successful in meeting this objective. NRECA commits to continue working with NTIA on these efforts.

¹⁴ See “Form 477 Resources,” Federal Communications Commission, available at: <https://www.fcc.gov/economics-analytics/industry-analysis-division/form-477-resources> (last visited Dec. 19, 2018).

Respectfully submitted,

National Rural Electric Cooperative Association

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