Fact Sheet

December 2022

NRECA
America's Electric Cooperatives

FCC Broadband Maps: Challenge Process Overview

Background

As policymakers work to close the digital divide, accurate broadband availability maps are crucially important. The FCC recently updated it's national broadband maps, but numerous errors persist. Since these maps will guide policymakers as they determine where billions of dollars are spent on rural broadband deployment, taking swift action to ensure these maps are accurate is essential.

What the Map Shows

Historically, the national broadband map has displayed broadband availability on a census block level. If one home in a census block had service, the whole block was considered to be served. Since this information did not accurately display broadband service availability and more granular information was needed, Congress directed the FCC to update the maps to reflect availability of service on a location by location basis, as self-reported by internet service providers. Numerous concerns persist that the data reported by providers and reflected in the maps still overstates broadband availability.

The new FCC map displays where internet services are *available* across the United States. It will be updated continuously via FCC verification efforts, new data from providers, updates to location data, and information from the public.

Internet service providers (ISPs) report broadband service data to the FCC twice a year through the FCC's Broadband Data Collection (BDC). ISPs offering internet to fixed locations, such as individual homes, must report where they offer service on a location by location basis. All providers report data as of June 30 (due September 1) and December 31 (due March 1) of each year.

How the Map Will Be Used

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) will use the FCC's new maps to allocate $42.5 billion in infrastructure funding to bridge the digital divide. NTIA expects to make this allocation by June of 2023. NTIA recognizes there may be errors in the FCC's maps. With that in mind, they are encouraging stakeholders to submit challenges to the FCC maps by January 13, 2023 in order for challenges to be considered by the time NTIA makes it's allocations.

Types of Challenges

The number of unserved and underserved locations identified by the maps will directly impact the amount of funding each state receives through BEAD, the infrastructure funding program for rural broadband. All cooperatives, not just those offering broadband services, have the ability to help improve the accuracy of the national broadband maps by participating in challenge processes and helping their members understand how to participate in the challenge and verification process.

Stakeholders including individuals, service providers, governments, and other entities are able to submit challenges to the data displayed by the map. Challenges are meant to dispute the availability data submitted by a provider, not the quality of service a provider offers, with the exception of crowdsource data, which can cover information about broadband speeds in addition to availability. The FCC map will be updated continuously by the FCC to improve accuracy and relfect growing broadband networks.

Bulk Fixed Availability Challenge
Stakeholders can file bulk challenges in response to the fixed broadband availability data reported by broadband providers. To do this, entities must upload data to the BDC system, identifying the locations and provider being challenged as well as a specific reason for a challenge. More information can be found here.

Crowdsource Data
Stakeholders are also able to submit bulk crowdsource information in response to the fixed availability data reported by broadband providers. In addition to service availability data, information on the quality of installed broadband service can be the subject of fixed crowdsource infromation. Unlike other challenges, crowdsource data may be submitted in situtations where observed speed of the service does not match its advertised speed. More details on how to prepare crowdsource data can be found here, and differnces between bulk challenges and crowdsource data can be found here.

Individual Locaton Challenge
The map shows individual points that identify buildings or structures, such as homes, apartment or condo buildings, or small businesses, where internet service is, or could be, available. The location points displayed on the maps include the address, whether the location is business or residential, and the number of separate units associated with the location. Missing locations, misidentified locations, incorrect information, and incorrect placement on the map can be challenged under this category. More details on the location data display and challenge process can be found here.

Individual Availability Challenge
The map shows internet availability, not network performace, affordability, or adoption data. For each location, the available internet services reported by providers will appear on the map. Service is considered to be available at a location if a provider has, or previously had, a connection to the location, or if the provider could initiate service through a routine intallation within 10 business days of a request with no extraordinary monetary charges or delays attributable to the extension of the providers network. More details on the individual availability challenge and how to submit an individual challenge can be found here.

Mobile Coverage Challenge
3G, 4G, and 5G coverage areas are also reported in the map based on information provided by mobile wireless service providers. The maps reflect where subscribers should be able to receive mobile connectivity when outdoors or in a moving vehicle, and do not display indoor coverage. Individuals can dispute this information by taking an outdoor or in-vehicle speed test on a mobile device using the FCC Speed Test App. More details on the mobile coverage challenge process can be found here.

Resolving Challenges

When a challenge is submitted, it will be sent to the challenged provider for a response. Providers must review the challenge and either concede or provide infromation to the FCC to rebut the challenge. Additionally, the provider is expected to work with individuals to resolve any challenge that it does not initially concede. Conceded challenges or those a provider fails to rebut will no longer be shown as available on the national map. Disputed challenges will be decided by the FCC. Providers are not required to respond to crowdsorce data submissions.