Fact Sheet

April 2024

Support Symmetrical Speeds in Federal Broadband Programs

Key Findings

- Consumer demands and needs for increased internet speeds continue to grow. Despite this, the Federal Communications Commission has done little to bring current federal standards in line with consumer expectations and market realities in urban areas.
- The economics of deploying reliable, high-speed broadband infrastructure in rural and remote areas are challenging. Federal funding is important to successfully bridge the digital divide. Those federal dollars are best spent supporting robust, scalable and "future proof" networks that can meet consumer needs today and well into the future.
- Congress must prioritize symmetrical broadband service with a minimum build speed of 100/100 megabits per second in all future rounds of federal funding assistance.

Background

Affordable and reliable broadband access remains a key priority for rural America. It is essential for economic development and enabling communities to fully participate in the digital economy. Consumer speed and bandwidth demands are increasing with the continued adoption of internet-of-things devices and applications, telework and applications supporting telehealth and online education.

In March 2024, the Federal Communications Commission raised its minimum broadband speed benchmark to 100/20 megabits per second from 25/3 Mbps, which was set in 2015. While this is a step in the right direction, it still falls short of current market demands and consumer trends. According to the FCC, numerous internet service providers in urban areas offer broadband service well in excess of the 100 Mbps benchmark, often exceeding 300 Mbps as the slowest subscription speed available.[1] [2] Many urban providers offer subscriptions of up to gigabit speeds or more to consumers, and the bandwidth requirements for high-quality applications continue to increase.

Bridging the Digital Divide

Recent federal broadband programs have demonstrated that higher network capacities are achievable and necessary in rural areas. The FCC recently announced that 97% of winning bids for the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund auction, which was held in 2020 and included numerous technologies and types of broadband providers, will provide gigabit-level service in awarded areas.[3] Additionally, the FCC's Precision Agriculture Task Force has repeatedly called for "significantly raising the standard on upload capacity over time" and has highlighted that "any new network deployed in today's environment must take into account throughput growth rates, and an exponential increase of devices and data streams utilizing the network during its lifespan."[4]

[1] https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/reports/measuring-broadband-america/measuring-fixed-broadband-twelfth-report
[2] https://benton.org/blog/how-fcc-got-10020
[3] https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-23-1185A1.pdf
[4] https://www.fcc.gov/sites/default/files/2024-Report-PrecisionAg-Task-Force-without-Signatures.pdf

The economics of deploying reliable, high-speed internet infrastructure in rural and remote areas can be daunting. Low population densities coupled with difficult terrain present little opporuntity for return on investment. This is is why Congress has recognized the ongoing need for federal assistance to ensure that rural and urban consumers receive comparable broadband access and service at comparable rates. With that in mind, taxpayer dollars are best spent supporting rural networks that can meet both current and future demands rather than subsidizing networks that only meet the bare minimum by today's standard or will soon fall short of meeting consumers' growing bandwith needs.

Congress must take a future-looking approach to supporting rural broadband networks by prioritizing symmetrical broadband service with a minimum "build-to" speed of at least 100/100 Mbps in all future rounds of federal funding, regardless of technology used. This will ensure that all consumers have access to reliable and affordable broadband service, no matter where they live, and eliminate the need to fund incremental upgrades for rural networks every few years.

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