

AGRICULTURE
NATURAL RESOURCES
SMALL BUSINESS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0603

August 5, 2014

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The Honorable Tom Wheeler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20536

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

Broadband Internet access has become an essential part of the economic and social fabric in many rural communities, as a tool to build businesses, apply for jobs, enhance educational opportunities and connect to friends and relatives. With robust broadband service, even a small town can rely on its residents' talent and determination to compete with the world. Without it, the same community risks being left behind in today's technology-driven economy.

Phase II of the Connect America Fund ("CAF II") offers a tremendous opportunity to bring speedier, fiber-fed broadband connections to millions of Americans who would not otherwise receive these benefits. Thanks to the Commission's well-publicized efforts, thousands of rural communities are now counting on CAF II. Indeed, the June 10 Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (FNPRM) has raised hopes even higher by more than doubling the promised download speeds from 4 Mbps to 10 Mbps. And because CAF II represents the final phase of Universal Service reform for these areas, its rules will effectively determine—for years to come—how broadband support is distributed in these areas.

I am writing today to emphasize how important it is to ensure that the final details of CAF II live up to its promise. I am concerned that if the Commission more than doubles the speed requirements without allowing the appropriate level of flexibility in other elements of CAF II, the program's overall mission could be endangered. Increasing broadband speeds is not as simple as turning a dial.

To the Commission's credit, the June 10 FNPRM identifies a number of constructive ideas that could provide this flexibility, while helping achieve the speedier network goals without exceeding the CAF II annual budget. We urge the Commission to adopt several of these proposals. First, the CAF II funding period must be extended from the current 5 years to 10 years to allow adequate time for the construction of the higher-capacity network. Additionally,

when determining whether an area is “served,” the Commission should eventually count only services providing 10 Mbps speeds or higher, rather than 4 Mbps. Furthermore, the Commission should establish a verification process that ensures other providers are indeed providing 10 Mbps speeds to prevent overbuilding.

The Commission also must establish network build-out parameters consistent with the goal of providing quality broadband service to as many people as possible within the CAF’s limited funding framework. As such, the Commission should give providers the flexibility to use CAF support to build facilities to unserved consumers in partially served census blocks.

Despite years of federal efforts to overcome the digital divide, I still often hear from my constituents seeking assistance to bring broadband service to their homes. The concerns they raise are a reminder of how challenging rural broadband policy can be, but also how important it is. Thank you for considering my concerns, and I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Scott Tipton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "S" and a circular flourish at the end.

Scott Tipton
Member of Congress