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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

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December 11, 2014

Honorable Tom Wheeler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th St., SW
Washington, DC 20554

1289

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

As each day passes without broadband in rural America, the digital divide widens between our urban and rural populations. In the 1930s, electric cooperatives brought electricity to rural America when the for-profit utilities would not. Today, that same scenario is being replayed as we deploy broadband service in rural America. Robust broadband service is no longer a luxury, but rather a necessity for full participation in our economy and society.

The Connect America Fund (CAF) Phase II represents a tremendous opportunity to fulfill the promise of ubiquitous access to high speed internet for every American. I commend the FCC's efforts to ensure that CAF funds are maximized to their best use, and recognize the complexities of this effort. I encourage the Commission to create an inclusive process where all eligible providers, including electric cooperatives, have an opportunity to compete for support by offering effective solutions to close the digital divide between rural and urban areas.

I write today to emphasize to the Commission a critical element in the comments filed by NRECA in this proceeding. Under the CAF-II process, areas in which a proposal for a rural broadband rural experiment is submitted should be removed from a price cap carrier's state-level commitment. By removing the right of first refusal, the Commission would enable a price cap carrier, the applicant submitting the formal proposal and any other eligible provider to participate in the competitive bidding process for model-based support for that area. This process should drive down costs and preserve scarce universal service funds. Competing for a chance to provide voice and broadband services in unserved and underserved locations is a *once in a generation* opportunity for entities such as electric cooperatives to close the digital divide. A more inclusive approach to solving this issue will allow for a better allocation of scarce universal service funds at relatively higher broadband service performance levels.

Without a level playing field, open to competition, rural America may never have the chance to experience the educational opportunities, employment prospects, and advanced healthcare that broadband delivers to those lucky enough to live in low cost, high population centers. I look forward to working with the Commission to bring broadband service to our constituents in Rural America.

Sincerely,



Tom Cole
Member of Congress

CC: Commissioner Mignon Clyburn
Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel
Commissioner Ajit Pai
Commissioner Michael O'Rielly