

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
AT THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS
MID-YEAR CONFERENCE**

UNCASVILLE, CT

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Thank you, First Vice President Sharp, for that kind introduction. Thank you to the Mohegan Tribe for your hospitality. And most importantly, thank you to the leadership of the National Congress of American Indians for inviting me to address your general assembly.

It's an honor to address this distinguished group. And I'm grateful for this opportunity to nurture a relationship between us that builds on the FCC's history of working with Tribal Nations on telecommunications matters affecting Indian Country.

This is the first time I have the privilege of addressing NCAI as Chairman. But it's not my first engagement on Tribal issues.

I've already had constructive meetings with several Tribal leaders and leaders of intertribal organizations. My first Tribal meeting as FCC Chairman was with President Cladoosby, whom I see seated at the head table. Our very first discussion item was about the trust relationship with Federally-recognized Tribes.

That reminds me of a point I want to make clear up front: I honor and embrace that trust relationship and my responsibilities as the Chairman of the FCC. Those responsibilities include a commitment for the Bureaus and Offices across our agency to work collaboratively with our Office of Native Affairs and Policy (ONAP). This will allow ONAP to seek input through all available means—including consultation with Tribal leaders on a government-to-government basis. Our aim is to ensure that the concerns and perspectives of Tribal Nations are considered and taken into account as we fulfill our mission.

Something else I mentioned to President Cladoosby is that I wanted to hear from Tribal leaders on their lands. It's critical that the FCC engage with groups like NCAI, but to me, there's no substitute for actually meeting with Tribal leaders where they live.

I've already put that promise into practice. This past week, my senior counsel and I took a 1,672-mile road trip from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Casper, Wyoming. It took 6 days, and we made 18 stops in five states. I met countless people from all walks of life (and the front of our car met countless bugs).

This trip was important to me for a couple of reasons. One is that as FCC Chairman, I think it's my duty to shine a spotlight on the people and places being bypassed by the digital communications revolution. We'll never address the challenges of isolated communities if we don't first acknowledge them. And without question, rural Americans, including many in Indian Country, disproportionately find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. They deserve our collective attention, and they certainly have my personal attention.

Second, it's really helpful for me to see and learn firsthand about the communications challenges Americans are wrestling with in their communities. It also is useful to learn about the innovative solutions community leaders are developing at the grassroots level.

Now, I said that I made 18 stops on this trip. None were more meaningful to me than my tribal consultation on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. I had the opportunity to meet with representatives of many Tribes, from Oklahoma to Wisconsin.

The stories I heard over several hours stick with me. I met with a man named Stephen Pourier. Steve told me the story of a woman in his community whom was found dead in her home, clutching her cellphone. She was in distress and dialed 911 38 times—but never got a response. There simply wasn't wireless coverage. He told another story of three young men in an automobile accident whose car slid into a ravine. Their phones showed that they had been calling 911. But help never came because the calls never went through. I heard several other perspectives like these.

Unfortunately, the statistics bear out these stories. They show how severe the connectivity challenges in Indian Country are. Approximately 85% of residents of Tribal lands in rural areas lack access to high-speed fixed broadband. Put more plainly, if you are part of that 85%, it's almost like living in a different era—one in which it's much harder to improve your life and the lives of your families. Discussions in Washington about 5G wireless networks, super-fast Wi-Fi, and telemedicine don't mean much if you don't have access to them.

And that lack of access is much more than an inconvenience. We don't bemoan the digital divide in Indian Country because some people can't play online games like Candy Crush. We focus on these issues because Internet connectivity has become vital to full participation in modern life—from the economy to education to healthcare to civic engagement. These days, not having Internet access means not being able to search job listings, not being able to take advantage of distance learning opportunities, not being able to consult remotely with a doctor when you live hours from the nearest hospital, and not being able to help store memories of your culture online.

That brings me to a critical question: What can the FCC do to bring the benefits of digital communications to Indian Country?

Because we respect your sovereign status, the FCC has historically worked in partnership with Tribal Nations to facilitate the provision of communications services to those living on Tribal lands. As a result of this trust relationship, there are currently 59 Tribal radio broadcast stations and nearly a dozen Tribally owned and controlled telecommunications carriers—with hopefully more on the horizon.

But more work needs to be done to promote broadband deployment on Tribal lands and throughout the United States. That's why, this past April, the FCC unanimously proposed several measures aimed at encouraging greater Internet access.

These proposals build upon previous FCC decisions to make federal funding available for building new broadband networks. I've made clear that constructing these networks in rural areas, including unserved and underserved Tribal lands, is a top priority of mine.

To meet that priority, the FCC has recently begun to move forward with our Connect America Fund Phase II reverse auction. In this auction, providers will compete for nearly \$2 billion in support to expand broadband to unserved areas, including on Tribal lands. I encourage you to engage in this process.

Additionally, we have adopted a framework to distribute \$4.53 billion in Mobility Fund Phase II subsidies to bring 4G LTE to parts of rural America that don't have it. Essentially, the

FCC will distribute these subsidies using an auction. Wireless companies will bid down the price of serving a particular area while committing to meet certain service standards in that area. Importantly, we specifically reserved at least \$340 million to bring 4G LTE to Tribal Lands over the next decade.

When the Connect America Fund and Mobility Fund auctions are completed, we'll look to move forward with the Remote Areas Fund. The gist of this Fund is simple: if there are areas that are still unserved after the two auctions I mentioned, the FCC will direct additional subsidies to build out broadband in those areas.

To sum up: We're putting dollars toward deployment. We're making sure we target unserved areas. And we're going to make sure that service meets the standards needed to deliver digital opportunity.

Along with these efforts, we're looking to remove some of the regulatory barriers that have kept many deployment plans on ice and too many Tribal members offline.

We're asking questions about how we can modernize our rules and procedures to help build next-generation networks while ensuring the protection of culturally significant sites. We are also asking for input from all interested parties. And that includes all of you. To be clear, the FCC's proposals are not the end of a conversation. They are just the beginning. So if you haven't already, I encourage you to file comments and let us know what you think. We take your views seriously.

In the past, the FCC has worked closely with Tribal governments, pursuant to our government-to-government relationship, to protect historic and sacred properties under the National Historic Preservation Act. And as we move forward, we will continue to do so.

But as networks evolve, so must our rules and procedures. Technological innovation is fundamentally changing how networks operate. Instead of the large, hundred-foot towers of the past, the networks of today and tomorrow are increasingly relying on small cell and distributed antenna system (DAS) infrastructure that has a much smaller footprint and a much lower profile.

Small cell, DAS, and 5G deployments hold great promise for delivery of new wireless services with increased speeds, accessibility, and reliability. And because these systems use smaller parts and less power, they may well reduce the potential for effects on the environment. At the same time, they will require many more antennas.

Our Tower Construction Notification System has been the envy of other federal agencies. It's uniformly touted by both Tribal Nations and industry as a good model for getting Tribal input. It effectively prevents projects from harming historic properties of religious and cultural significance to Tribes. I believe the basic system remains sound. But some have argued that we need to adapt it to work with the networks of tomorrow. Given the common ground on these issues—namely, promoting broadband for all Americans and preserving Tribes' heritage—I hope we can reach consensus.

Speaking of Tribal heritage, let me assure you that we also share a common commitment to respecting your history. When I visited the Rosebud Sioux Reservation, I heard from Sheila Bird. She explained to me how Tribal members have to think about the seven generations that came before her—and the onus that puts on the present to preserve the culture for generations to come. Historic preservation isn't just about the here and now, but the future, too. Dianne

Desrosier told me how her people had been put there by the Creator and how her calling is to preserve cultural memories.

I was honored to hear these and other perspectives last week. And going forward, the FCC wants and needs to hear your voices. We want to understand your perspectives as the Commission seeks to meet the twin goals of digitally empowering your members and protecting your heritage.

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Late last week, I had the good fortune to visit the Crazy Horse Memorial. The stories I learned, the artifacts I saw, and the face of Crazy Horse, carved in the huge rock above the museum, all inspired me. I left the Memorial with much to think about.

After I got home, I did some research on Crazy Horse. I found the following quotation: “A very great vision is needed, and the man who has it must follow it as the eagle seeks the deepest blue of the sky.” I do not pretend to have as grand a vision as the one he had in mind. And I can only hope to have the courage and focus of the eagle he referenced. But my aspiration is one of opportunity for all Tribal members, now and to come. I intend to do my part to help all Tribal Nations see a brighter future.

The challenges before us are significant. There are no overnight solutions. But I want you to know that I will always have an open door to Tribal Nations and an open mind on Tribal views. If we work together—if we consult and collaborate—we can bring greater digital opportunity to Indian Country and lift up Tribal communities in many ways.

Let’s get to work—together.