

**OPENING REMARKS OF CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
AT THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS
EXECUTIVE COUNCIL WINTER SESSION**

WASHINGTON, DC

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Good morning and welcome to the FCC.

You graciously welcomed me to your annual meeting in Connecticut last June. I'm glad to have the opportunity to return the hospitality by hosting you here at the Commission.

I understand this is your fourth and final day in Washington. Throw in the Mardi Gras and Valentine's Day celebrations, and you have already had a pretty big week! We're going to do our best to make sure your visit ends on a high note.

As you know, increasing access to broadband and other telecommunications services in rural areas, including on Tribal lands, has been one of my top priorities.

We recently released an update on how those efforts are going. The FCC issued what we call our Broadband Progress Report, which is essentially our annual snapshot of the state of broadband deployment in America.

The good news is that the percentage of Americans living on Tribal lands who lack access to high-speed broadband has been cut in half since I arrived at the Commission in 2012.

The bad news is that that percentage is still over four times higher than for the overall U.S. population.

To give you some numbers: From 2012 to 2016, the percent of Tribal area residents without broadband access dropped from 68% to 35%. To give that number some context, only 8% of the overall population lacks Internet access.

These numbers back up what you already know: When it comes to broadband deployment in Indian Country, we've made some progress, but not enough. Too often, Tribal communities still find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. We're a long way from where we need to be.

You're here to talk about ways to close that gap, which is an important issue for us here at the Commission as well. Our FCC staff, including the Office of Native Affairs and Policy and the Bureaus and Offices you'll be meeting with today, are here to do a deep dive with you. But I do want to highlight one of the most recent steps we are taking to help address this problem.

Just weeks ago, I proposed providing over \$500 million in additional funding for broadband deployment in rural America. As part of this order, I am seeking reforms to the Connect America Fund to improve its efficiency and effectiveness. In particular, I've called for the use of a Tribal Broadband Factor—that is, a boost in Tribal funding that recognizes the unique challenges associated with network deployment on Tribal lands. To be blunt, more money will enable better access.

Beyond smarter management of the Commission's universal service programs, the FCC is looking at how to help promote more infrastructure. We continue to explore ways to remove regulatory barriers that have kept many deployment plans on the shelf and kept too many Americans offline.

As you know, we've been engaging with Tribal leaders about how we can modernize our rules and procedures to help build next-generation networks while ensuring the protection of culturally significant sites.

The FCC has worked closely with Tribal governments over the past year, pursuant to our government-to-government relationship. I personally have made trips across the country and met here in Washington with Tribal leaders, and my office and our agency's staff have continued that outreach in a variety of formats. We want to make sure Tribal interests are heard as we aim to get all Americans connected.

Speaking of that goal, I understand you will be talking with Commissioner Carr later on today. I've asked him to take the lead on our review of the Commission's wireless infrastructure regulations—in particular, updating our rules to help our communities get connected. I'm sure he will have more to share with you.

But before I close, I want to highlight a significant call to action the FCC made last Thursday, when we issued a Public Notice announcing the renewal of what we call the Native Nations Communications Task Force and seeking member nominations.

Originally created in 2011, this latest renewal recognizes the importance of Tribal input on Commission matters that impact Americans living on Tribal lands.

I'm grateful to the Tribal officials who have served on the Task Force in the past and encourage you to submit nominations from your Tribes to serve on the latest iteration.

As in the past, the Task Force will consist of 20 Tribal members and 11 FCC senior staff members. Nominations are due by March 31, and we hope to convene the first meeting of the renewed Task Force as early as this spring.

In the meantime, I know you have a packed day of meetings and sessions with our incredible FCC staff. So let me close by thanking you once more for your counsel and partnership. Working together, we've made meaningful progress. With the talent and energy in this room, we can continue closing the digital divide and expanding digital opportunity across Indian Country.