

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

317

May 29, 2019

Honorable Ajit Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

We are writing to you today regarding ongoing efforts by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to identify more precisely where fixed and mobile broadband service is available or lacking in the United States.

Current broadband availability maps are based largely upon whatever information may be received from providers. Although the FCC's database may represent the most complete repository of such information available today, there are several problems with the current maps. The prime example is that the maps are not granular enough; in the context of fixed broadband, an entire census block will appear as served even if service is offered to only one location within that census block. This can result in denial of broadband network funding or financing in such areas, like through the FCC's Universal Service Fund or the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service, leaving many locations without essential broadband service simply because they share a census block with a served household. Another significant concern is that the maps represent unvalidated reports from providers. While providers self-certify the accuracy of their own reported data, the processes used to verify such information before funding or financing decisions are made can vary and, in many cases, such processes do not exist at all.

In Colorado, we've seen a variety of cases that reflects a systemic, nationwide problem. For example, one Colorado telephone cooperative filed FCC comments in July 2015 in response to a competitive overlap situation. This cooperative is a rural local exchange carrier (RLEC) offering traditional voice and broadband services to its customers in a very sparsely populated rural area. The RLEC discovered that an unsubsidized competitor was erroneously claiming 100% overlap in its service area. In its comments, the RLEC included supporting documentation with an admission by this unsubsidized competitor that it could not in fact provide service in the area, but they were still unable to secure federal assistance. Due to the inaccuracy of the existing broadband availability maps, based on the Form 477, much-needed federal support was jeopardized, and eventually lost, because of inaccurate coverage data and a challenging process that did not adequately consider the evidence provided by the incumbent provider.

Furthermore, in 2016, another telephone company experienced problems with mapping and the corresponding FCC challenge process as part of the Alternative Connect America Model version 2.2. This telephone company is a small RLEC offering traditional voice and broadband service to rural residents in eastern Colorado. This RLEC discovered that the FCC had identified two companies as qualified competitors in several census blocks; however, the provider was able to verify that neither company could meet the FCC requirements of providing both voice service and data service of at least 10 Mbps up / 1 Mbps down. In this case, the FCC offered a small correction, which fortunately led to the release of partial funding. However, these cases provide evidence of the impact of faulty maps on funding needed to deploy robust broadband networks. Without reliable broadband availability maps, residents throughout Colorado, as well as across the rest of America, will be left without adequate broadband service.

We are writing to ask the FCC to take immediate steps to address such concerns. First, it is important for the FCC to develop more standardized granular reporting of broadband availability, including considering the option of whether to require providers to submit shapefiles to demonstrate service availability – while also balancing the burdens of reporting especially for smaller operators, like RLECs. Moreover, it is important to ensure the accuracy of that more granular data.

Second, as the broadband case demonstrates, and FCC's previous Mobility Fund experience indicated, reliance only upon self-reported data will not yield accurate information or good results to deploy needed funding. We therefore encourage the FCC to establish robust and meaningful challenge processes that will enable better validation of both fixed and mobile data prior to relying upon such data in making funding or financing decisions.

Broadband access is a vital link to a range of necessary services and resources for America's rural residents. Not only is it an economic development tool for businesses that may be isolated from potential customers, employees, and legal services, but it broadens educational horizons for students and offers healthcare providers flexible and cost-effective care-delivery approaches. Thus, it is critical to ensure inaccurate information will not result in a denial of access to fixed or mobile broadband. A validated set of data based upon standardized methods of granular reporting will be essential to ensuring that universal service is available throughout rural America.

Thank you for your attention to this request. We look forward to working with you as the FCC continues to ensure all Coloradans – and all Americans – have access to robust and reliable broadband.

Sincerely,



MICHAEL F. BENNET
United States Senator



CORY GARDNER
United States Senator



JASON CROW
Member of Congress



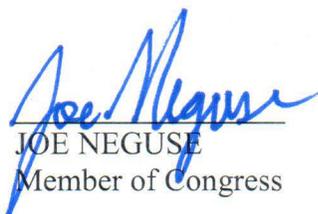
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