

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
AT THE NATIONAL TRIBAL BROADBAND SUMMIT**

WASHINGTON, DC

SEPTEMBER 23, 2019

Good morning. What a pleasure it is to start off the week alongside those in the audience who are devoting so much effort to connecting the unconnected.

Thank you to Assistant Secretary Sweeney for inviting me. Thanks to all those at the Departments of the Interior and Education and the Institute for Museum and Library Services who organized this summit. And most important, thanks to all of the Tribal leaders who are working so hard to connect Indian Country.

On my very first day as FCC Chairman, I said that my top priority would be closing the digital divide and bringing the benefits of high-speed Internet to all Americans. And as this audience knows all too well, nowhere is that divide more pronounced than on Tribal lands.

I've seen these challenges first-hand during numerous trips to Tribal communities. I'll never forget a story I heard during my visit to the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. A woman was found dead in her home, clutching her cellphone. She had dialed 911 a total of 38 times, but the calls never went through. There just wasn't wireless coverage. And in Navajo Nation, I learned about a man near Gallup, New Mexico who missed out on a life-saving kidney transplant because he lacked phone service and couldn't be reached in time.

As sobering as these stories can be, my travels through Indian Country have also left me inspired. That's because I've seen the significant successes many Tribes are having closing the digital divide on Tribal lands.

For example, just a few months ago, I was in Oklahoma, where I met with Governor Bill Anoatubby and members of the Chickasaw Nation. They told me about Trace Fiber, a Tribally-owned subsidiary of the Chickasaw Nation, which is currently building out a 500-mile fiber ring. Before that, I visited the Coeur d'Alene Reservation in Idaho, where Valerie Fast Horse explained how Red Spectrum Communications is bringing broadband to Tribal members using fiber and fixed wireless technologies. And I cherish the memories of a trip to the Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico, where I went to a school which got reliable Internet access for the first time.

Visits like these have shown me that bringing high-speed connectivity to rural Tribal lands can be a game-changer. It opens enables teleworking, job searches, and even starting an online business. It enables patients to consult with specialists without having to drive hours to the nearest hospital. And it enables students to take advanced math and science classes online, if they aren't offered at the local school.

I'm proud to have launched several FCC initiatives to expand broadband access on Tribal lands, which complement the efforts of our federal partners.

One new policy I'm particularly excited about will give Tribes priority access to spectrum in the 2.5 GHz band. This band is the largest contiguous block of spectrum below 3 GHz in the United States. But today, this valuable spectrum currently isn't used in most of the Western United States. That's partly because technological advances have rendered the band's original intended uses outdated, and partly because arcane rules have left it dramatically underused.

So this summer, the FCC took action. We removed obsolete restrictions on this band, allowing greater flexibility in how the spectrum can be used. But here's the big news you'll want to know about: We're giving rural Indian tribes an exclusive window to obtain this spectrum to serve rural Tribal lands. That's right. Before any commercial auction of this spectrum, Tribes can obtain this spectrum for free. This is the first time in the FCC's history that we have ever given Tribal entities what we call a "priority window" to obtain spectrum for wireless broadband. I'm proud that it is happening under my watch, and I hope that Tribes will take advantage of it.

The potential this spectrum brings to rural Tribal communities isn't speculation. The Havasupai Tribe, located at the base of the Grand Canyon, currently uses four 2.5 GHz channels to offer LTE broadband service. It's being used by the community's Early Head Start building, teachers, and K-12 students.

The FCC has also done a lot to promote the expansion of fixed broadband networks in Indian Country. As you know, it can be a challenge to connect and serve Tribal lands. Many of the small, legacy carriers that serve Tribal communities confront that challenge with financial support from the FCC's Universal Service Fund. To address the higher costs these so-called rate-of-return carriers typically face, in 2018, the FCC increased the amount of operating expenses that these carriers can recover from the Fund.

We've also instituted broader reforms to the subsidies that the FCC provides small, traditional carriers. These reforms are designed to expedite the deployment of high-speed broadband in rural America. And last month, the FCC authorized a new round of support for rate-of-return carriers, which will ensure fixed broadband is available to over 37,000 locations on Tribal lands. Notably, this funding included a Tribal Broadband Factor, which increased financial support specifically for rural carriers serving Tribal lands.

All of these reforms are already having an impact. For example, Golden West, the carrier serving the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, has told us that our reforms have enabled the company to expand and speed up its deployment of fiber. And as a result, over 90% of the locations on the Pine Ridge Reservation will be connected to fiber in the next two to three years.

Separately, the FCC's Connect America Fund Phase II reverse auction in 2018 allocated \$1.5 billion to expand broadband in rural areas. Six of the winning bidders were Tribally-owned providers. And last month, we distributed the latest round of support to the winning bidders. This included \$4.1 million for Northern Arapaho Tribal Industries. This funding will help connect 849 homes and businesses on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, all of which will get access to service delivering gigabit speeds. You heard that right: Those living on the Wind River Reservation will have the same super-fast broadband connections as those living in our nation's big cities. And as the executive manager of Wind River Internet put it, "On the Reservation, houses aren't a block apart, they're a mile apart. This [money] allows us to have the infrastructure needed to get broadband services to these extremely rural areas where otherwise, there's just no way to fund it."

Looking ahead, there's more to come. The FCC recently launched an effort to create a \$20.4 billion reverse auction to connect rural homes and businesses. We call it our Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. An important priority for me is to ensure that this program will advance broadband deployment on rural Tribal lands. That's why we're looking at ways to give carriers bidding on Tribal lands an advantage in the auction, such as by giving bids to serve Tribal lands a 25% "bump" and exploring a Tribal bidding credit to incentivize parties to bid on and serve Tribal lands.

In addition to all this, the FCC has another universal service program dedicated to meeting the connectivity needs of rural hospitals and clinics. In 2018, the FCC raised the funding cap for the Rural Health Care program for the first time in the program's history. Indeed, we increased annual funding by

more than 40%, from \$400 million to \$571 million, and the cap will now be adjusted for inflation going forward. This revamped program is important to many Native communities.

So far, I've talked a lot about our policies. But it's also important to me to improve communications and engagement with Tribal communities. Last December, I renewed the Native Nations Communications Task Force. This advisory group includes Tribal members and senior Commission staff, and it's working to help the FCC better understand and address the unique challenges of increasing deployment on Tribal lands. By the way, we're currently seeking nominations to fill several Tribal vacancies on this Task Force. The deadline for nominations is Wednesday—two days from now. If you're interested, please do apply, and soon.

And that sense of urgency also applies to the work all of us need to do to close the digital divide in Indian Country. It can't be closed overnight, but we need to act with a spirit of resolve. Otherwise, Tribal communities will fall further behind. That's why this summit is so important. That's why I'm excited to be here. And that's why the FCC will keep working to expand broadband deployment on Tribal lands. Working together, we can and will bring greater digital opportunity to those living in Indian Country.