



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

August 24, 2020

The Honorable Tom Cole
United States House of Representatives
2467 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congresswoman Haaland:

Thank you for your letter regarding the 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window and the Commission's upcoming Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. Closing the digital divide is my top priority as Chairman. I have seen for myself what affordable high-speed Internet access can do for a community—for its families, its schools, its hospitals, its farms, its businesses—as well as the impact of its absence. I also fully recognize the importance of broadband and telecommunications services in Tribal communications, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window, which opened February 3, is a unique opportunity for eligible Tribal entities to obtain licenses for prime mid-band spectrum that can help Tribes address their connectivity needs. While the application window was originally scheduled to close on August 3, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was extended an additional 30-days until 6 pm EDT on September 2, 2020.

This 30-day extension strikes an appropriate balance between providing more time for additional Tribal entities to apply and not unduly delaying the grant of licenses to those that have already applied. The Commission cannot start the process of issuing licenses to eligible applicants until after the window closes, because we will not know the extent of mutually exclusive applications for as long as the window is open. A much longer extension would therefore substantially delay our award of licenses to Tribal entities and thus delay their ability to use this spectrum to connect those consumers living on Tribal lands. Moreover, in light of the simplified application process as well as the extensive outreach done by Commission staff (including contacting every single federally recognized Tribe and Alaska Native Village the month before the window opened, first by phone or other direct contact, and a second time by letter), a lengthy extension of the deadline is unnecessary. The Commission has already received over 333 applications from Tribal entities.

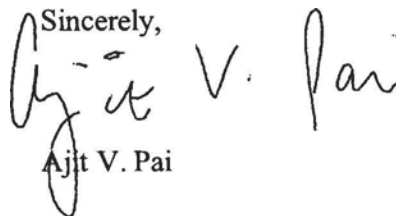
Commission staff continues to work hard on this initiative, enabling eligible Tribal entities to apply and avail themselves of its benefits as soon as possible. We encourage potential Tribal applicants to make inquiries via e-mail to RuralTribalWindow@fcc.gov so that Commission staff can answer any questions they might have about the application process.

With respect to the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, it represents the Commission's boldest step yet in bridging the digital divide. Building upon the success of the CAF Phase II auction, the \$20.4 billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund will use a two-phase reverse auction to

allocate support for up to gigabit service to millions of unserved Americans who currently lack access to fixed 25/3 Mbps broadband. Phase I will target up to \$16 billion in support over ten years to wholly unserved census blocks—those areas where no one disputes that there is no 25/3 Mbps service at all—in order to make sure that the areas most in need receive broadband service quickly. Then, Phase II will make available at least \$4.4 billion to fill in the remaining coverage gaps by supporting networks that will serve partially unserved census blocks that will be identified through the Commission’s ongoing Digital Opportunity Data Collection proceeding, along with areas not won in Phase I. In March, the Commission’s Wireline Competition Bureau released the preliminary list of census blocks and a map of areas deemed initially eligible for the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I auction. A challenge process then commenced—a process that was completed in June. The Commission has released an updated list of unserved locations for eligible bidding in the Phase I Auction. On May 20, 2020, the Commission conducted an informational webinar to provide Tribal as well as state, local and territorial governments with an overview of Phase I of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund auction. Subsequently, on July 15, we closed the window for entities to file the short-form application to participate in the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I auction on October 29, 2020.

I do not believe that we should delay the start of the Rural Digital Opportunity Phase I Auction. Such a postponement would delay the deployment of high-speed broadband to unserved areas and keep more Americans on the wrong side of the digital divide for a longer period of time. It would delay many Americans’ access to telehealth, distance learning, and the numerous other services and opportunities made available through a high-speed broadband connection.

Again, I appreciate your interest in this matter. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,

Ajit V. Pai



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WASHINGTON

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August 24, 2020

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United States House of Representatives
1237 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

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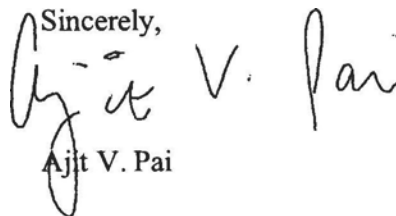
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