

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

SEPTEMBER 21, 2020

Hello, everybody! It's great to be at the second annual National Tribal Broadband Summit. What a great way to kick off the week.

Thank you to Assistant Secretary Sweeney for inviting me. Thanks to all those at the Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, 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.

I was honored to be a part of last year's inaugural summit. Obviously, things are different this year in ways none of us expected. But one thing that remains unchanged is my commitment to bringing the benefits of broadband and other modern communications services to unserved and underserved Tribal areas.

Since my first day in this job, I've said that closing the digital divide was my top priority. 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—from the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota to the Navajo Nation in Arizona, and from the Coeur D'Alene Reservation in Idaho to Chickasaw Nation in Oklahoma. In fact, the last trip I took before the pandemic ended the FCC's travel was to the Wind River Reservation in rural Wyoming.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has kept me from visiting Indian Country over the past six months. But it hasn't stopped us from making significant progress on many fronts in the past year.

One new policy I'm particularly excited about is giving 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. And it offers favorable coverage and capacity characteristics for next-generation mobile services, such as 5G, as well as communications services.

But today, this valuable spectrum currently isn't being used in most of the Western United States. That's partly because technological advances rendered the band's original intended uses outdated, and partly because arcane rules limited this band's full potential.

So, in 2019, the FCC took action. We removed obsolete restrictions on this band, allowing greater flexibility in how the spectrum can be used. Notably for this audience, we voted to give Tribal entities an exclusive window to obtain access to available 2.5 GHz band spectrum—for free—to serve rural Tribal lands. Successful Tribal applicants will ultimately receive overlay licenses for exclusive use of up to 117.5 megahertz of this prime, mid-band spectrum for broadband and other next-generation wireless services.

To ensure every eligible Tribe was aware of the priority window and had the information and assistance needed to take advantage of it, FCC staff worked tirelessly to contact every federally recognized Tribe multiple times, through a combination of in-person events, letters, emails, and phone calls, before the window opened. Staff held multiple Tribal workshops and made numerous presentations at Tribal events across the country as well. I personally participated with staff in a full-day workshop on January 14, conducted at FCC headquarters and simulcast over the Internet to inform Tribes about how to take advantage of this historic opportunity. Our outreach continued after the window opened on February

3, and our staff engaged in hundreds of one-on-one interactions by email and phone when the COVID-19 pandemic limited in-person events. We responded to every inquiry we received from potential applicants.

The window was initially opened for 182 days, and during that time we received hundreds of applications. But in July we extended the window by an additional 30 days, until September 2, to give Tribes impacted by the pandemic more time to file their applications. In doing so, we balanced giving Tribes more time to complete their applications against the delay a longer extension would create in making this spectrum available to Tribes.

I'm very proud of how hard Commission staff worked to ensure broad awareness of this opportunity throughout Indian Country, how hard they worked to help eligible Tribes file applications, and how hard they are working now to review over 400 applications that we've received. Just last week, we announced that 157 applications have already passed the initial review. As required by law, the FCC is now putting these applications out for public comment before any final action is taken. Staff are continuing to review the remaining applications, and we will put them out for public comment as that review process unfolds.

The FCC has also done a lot to promote the expansion of fixed broadband networks in Indian Country through the Commission's Universal Service Fund.

Our newest—and biggest—initiative to close the digital divide is our upcoming Rural Digital Opportunity Fund auction. The \$20.4 billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund will connect millions of unserved homes and businesses through a two-phase reverse auction that encourages deployment of the best-performing networks for the lowest cost-possible. Bidding in Phase I begins next month, and we are making up to \$16 billion available to bring high-speed broadband to unserved areas where we estimate around 10.4 million Americans live and work.

The Fund includes provisions that will help ensure that service providers will be competing to win the right to serve Tribal lands. We gave Tribal lands a bump in the auction; we took steps to make an additional 30,000 or more homes and businesses in Tribal areas eligible to receive support in the auction, and to make more funding available to all eligible Tribal areas than would otherwise have been available in the auction.

The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund builds on the success of 2018's Connect America Fund Phase II reverse auction, which allocated \$1.5 billion to expand broadband to more than 700,000 unserved homes and businesses. Six Tribally-owned carriers won support in that auction. During my visit earlier this year to the Wind River Reservation, I have the privilege of seeing firsthand how the Northern Arapaho Tribe is using funding from this auction to deploy gigabit-speed fiber broadband to over 800 homes and businesses. There might have been snow on the ground, but I received the warmest of welcomes. I am grateful for their hospitality and, more important, for the Tribal leaders' ingenuity in bringing world-class connectivity to this remote area.

The Commission has also taken steps over the past three years to ensure that many small, rural providers that are already receiving Universal Service support to serve Tribal communities can confront that challenge head on. 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 above what carriers serving non-Tribal lands can recover.

We also instituted reforms for some other small, rural carriers. These reforms are designed to expedite the deployment of high-speed broadband in rural America. And, in 2019, 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. This funding also included a "Tribal Broadband Factor," which provides a 25% increase in the amount of subsidies that carriers serving Tribal lands can receive compared to similar carriers serving non-Tribal lands.

We have also proposed establishing a new 5G Fund for Rural America. In April, the Commission voted to advance a plan that would make up to \$9 billion available to bring 5G mobile broadband service to rural areas that would otherwise be unlikely to see deployment of next-generation wireless networks. Under this proposal, Phase I of the 5G Fund auction would reserve \$680 million for providers that commit to serving eligible Tribal lands. Carriers serving Tribal lands would still also be eligible to bid for support from the non-reserved budget as well.

At last year's summit, I touted how the Commission had recently raised the funding cap for the Rural Health Care program. For the current funding year, \$802.7 million is available to ensure that rural health care providers will have access to the connectivity they need to treat their patients, more than double the available funding when I took office as Chairman.

This March, we were able to create a new \$200 million COVID-19 Telehealth Program to support healthcare providers responding to the ongoing pandemic. We had the rules for this program in place barely a week after Congress appropriated the funds as part of the CARES Act. Two weeks later, the Commission opened the application portal and by early July had awarded the full \$200 million to 539 recipients, including several providers serving Tribal communities. For instance, we awarded the Navajo Nation Department of Health just over \$950,000 in May to provide home-health care and remote monitoring services throughout the Navajo Nation to patients who are isolated and under shelter-in-place orders, including low-income, elderly, and vulnerable, high-risk patients.

Under my leadership, the FCC has not only increased our investments in Tribal communities, we've stepped up our engagement. The Commission has long looked to leaders of Native Nations for advice and guidance on Tribal matters. After re-chartering the Commission's Native Nations Communications Task Force in 2018, I expanded Tribal membership from 20 to 25 earlier this year. The Task Force has already made important contributions to the Commission's ongoing work to identify and overcome obstacles to greater broadband access in Tribal communities.

Our investments on Tribal lands have had a real impact, too. In my first three years as Chairman of the FCC, the number of unserved Americans living on Tribal lands has fallen more than 43%. I'm confident that these and other steps the Commission is taking will continue to increase broadband access on Tribal lands. When we increase access to broadband, we increase access to education, to employment, to healthcare, and so many other opportunities of the digital age.

But for all this progress, there is much more work to do, and we must do this work together.

As sovereign nations, you have the power to shape your own destiny. You have provided and will continue to provide the direction, the ideas, the leadership your communities need to ensure they have access to modern communications services equal to other Americans.

The FCC stands ready to serve as your partner in this effort. As this summit reflects, there are many other federal and state agencies standing with us. Working together, we will build a brighter digital future for Native communities across this great nation.