



**Statement of the
Missouri Farm Bureau Federation**

**TO THE HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC
BUILDINGS, AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

**Investing in America: Reauthorization of the
Economic Development Administration
April 28th, 2021**

**Presented By:
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Good afternoon Chairwoman Titus (D-NV), Ranking Member Webster (R-FL) and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Garrett Hawkins, and I am a fifth-generation farmer and the third generation in my family to own and operate the farm on which we live today. Agriculture runs deep in our extended family and spans livestock, row crop, and dairy production. I am a proud husband and father, and I serve as President of Missouri Farm Bureau (MOFB). I appreciate the opportunity to provide input on the necessity of rural broadband deployment and its importance to economic development across rural America.

Deployment of broadband technology is a critical link in stimulating and revitalizing the rural economy. Rural broadband (fixed and mobile) is essential to modern agriculture, the farmers and ranchers who grow our food, and the quality of life for rural Americans. While most Americans take broadband for granted, according to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 17% of rural Americans lack access to fixed terrestrial 25 Mbps/3 Mbps broadband, compared to only 1% of urban Americans. This is discouraging. Additionally, the data and methodology used to collect broadband coverage has failed to accurately determine broadband access resulting in an unreliable estimate of rural Americans with broadband access. Farm Bureau members have recognized the urgent need to deploy broadband in rural communities and have elevated broadband access and affordability as a priority due to its impact on their daily lives.

In Missouri, I see the need for broadband in rural communities every day. One family I know operates a soil testing lab with customers worldwide. Until recently, they struggled to find affordable, reliable broadband service. They were paying hundreds of dollars a month for sub-par broadband to barely run their business. However, with the advancements and investments that have been made over the past few years, they are now able to access reliable service at their farm and at their lab, making it easier to conduct their global business.

Other families I know use online marketing tools to market their products throughout the country. Farms and agribusinesses utilize broadband every day to make their business model a success. Whether it is a business that provides an agricultural service to a local community or a company that ships products all over the country, this service is critical to our everyday life. Just last month I was visiting a farmer in southern Missouri who was thrilled to see a fiber-optic line being installed just a few miles from his farm. "Maybe", he said, "they'll come my way in just a year or so."

In Missouri, we have taken strong action to bring more broadband to rural communities. In 2017, Missouri Farm Bureau convened the "Missouri Broadband Working Group." This group was comprised of over 120 stakeholders from all industries that formed legislative and regulatory recommendations that were ultimately taken to our Governor and Congressional delegation. As a result, Missouri's Governor established the Office of Broadband within our Department of Economic Development. This office is responsible for keeping their finger on the pulse of all things broadband in Missouri. The creation of this office would not have been possible without the collaborative efforts of Farm Bureau, our state Departments of Agriculture and Economic Development, and the University of Missouri.

In addition, we successfully advocated for the Missouri Broadband Grant Program, which provides financial assistance to providers who are seeking to deploy broadband in underserved and unserved areas. Last year, the Missouri legislature passed legislation supported by MOFB that would allow our Department of Economic Development's Community Improvement District and Neighborhood Improvement District programs to be used to facilitate broadband deployment within those districts.

Just recently, we have seen success with a few EDA-funded projects in rural Missouri. One community has been awarded funds that will bring additional broadband infrastructure to the community and enhance both business and telework capabilities in this town of approximately 3,000 people. In addition, many of our Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs) and Councils of Government have been able to identify projects in their jurisdiction. Five out of our 19 RPCs are in the process of funding projects with EDA funds that were awarded via the CARES Act which will help deploy broadband.

Although we have been able to make significant strides in our state, the work is far from finished. Farm Bureau has and will continue to advocate for significant investment to support broadband deployment in rural communities. Knowing where adequate broadband services do and do not exist is critical to crafting sound public policies related to broadband deployment in rural areas.

The ability of the FCC and all other relevant agencies to utilize accurate broadband coverage maps has been a priority. Last Congress, Farm Bureau advocated for the passage of the Broadband Deployment Accuracy and Technological Availability Act (Broadband DATA Act) which was signed into law March 2020 as part of the CARES Act. This bipartisan and comprehensive bill improves the accuracy of broadband coverage maps and better directs federal funds for broadband buildout. Specifically, this bill requires the FCC to improve the accuracy and granularity of its maps by establishing a serviceable location fabric, which will serve as a baseline for served, underserved and unserved broadband areas, an outcome that Farm Bureau policy supports. We were pleased Congress provided funding to implement this Act in December 2020 and look forward to its full implementation.

Farmers and ranchers depend on broadband just as they do highways, railways and waterways to ship food, fuel and fiber across the country and around the world. Many of the latest yield maximizing farming techniques require broadband connections for data collection and analysis performed both on the farm and in remote data centers. However, 29 percent of U.S. farms have no access to the Internet according to the USDA report, "Farm Computer Usage and Ownership, 2017."

America's farmers and ranchers embrace technology that allows their farming businesses to be more efficient, economical and environmentally responsible. Today's farmers and ranchers are using precision agricultural techniques to make decisions that impact the amount of fertilizer they need to purchase and apply to their fields, the amount of water needed to sustain crops, and the amount and type of herbicides or pesticides needed. These are only a few examples of how farmers use broadband connectivity to achieve optimal yield, lower environmental impact and maximize profits.

Knowing exactly where further buildout is needed is critical to ensuring American farmers and ranchers can continue to innovate here at home and globally. Farmers and ranchers rely on broadband access to manage and operate successful businesses, the same as small businesses do in urban and suburban America. Access to broadband is essential for farmers and ranchers to follow commodity markets, communicate with their customers, gain access to new markets around the world and, increasingly, to ensure regulatory compliance.

Beyond specific on-farm needs, rural communities need access to health care, government services, and educational and business opportunities. For many rural communities, access can only be gained by using broadband services and sophisticated technologies that require high-speed connections. The coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated and made more apparent the need for rural broadband in rural communities as employees shifted to working from home, school districts closed and resorted to distance learning platforms, and patients sought health care through telemedicine platforms.

As more and more primary care physicians and specialists leave rural communities, telemedicine has become a necessity to provide critical healthcare to our parents and kids. In my hometown of Appleton City, Missouri, I serve on my local hospital board. Our hospital is one of the smallest critical access hospitals in the state. The hospital, which was founded by my family several generations ago, employs over 100 people in our local community and is one of our largest employers. As we strive to keep our rural hospital thriving and adapting to the latest and greatest medical technology, we often find that having enough providers to serve our telehealth patients is not the problem – our unstable internet connection hinders us in providing these popular services.

Healthcare is not the only area where broadband can help revitalize our rural economy. As we continue to weather the COVID-19 pandemic and individuals continue to embrace telework options, our rural communities can thrive if they have stable internet connections. In my hometown, I know many individuals who, although they may not have broadband at their homes or farms, are able to utilize connected work spaces in our once-empty downtown. These individuals are able to stay and contribute to their local community and inject their income into our local economy, rather than being tethered to an urban center.

As Congress and the Administration deliberates proposals to advance the deployment of broadband to rural communities, please consider the following principles.

- **Data Accuracy & Mapping:** We continue to advocate for additional mapping and the use of more granular data sets when determining which areas are eligible for federal (and state) funding.
- **Plan for the Future:** When awarding broadband projects, we should consider speeds that account for teleworking and remote education needs, rather than just recreational use of broadband.
- **Foster Local, State, and Federal Partnerships:** Close working relationships between local, state, and federal partners are critical to maximize the use of funds available for broadband deployment. Various entities that deploy broadband should work together

to the greatest extent possible in order to ensure the needs of rural America are being met.

- Focus on Precision Agriculture: Too often, federal programs do not take into account the specific needs of agriculture and rural America when developing programs that incentivize deployment. Agriculture as a whole has the potential to be a strong beneficiary of rural broadband services, and it will be important to take these needs into account. Access to broadband and data services can result in more data-driven decisions on the farm, if the technology is available.

Farm Bureau appreciates the Subcommittee's interest in rural broadband deployment and the economic viability of rural communities. Rural broadband (fixed and mobile) is essential to modern agriculture, the farmers and ranchers who grow our food and the quality of life for rural Americans. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on an issue so critically important to the individuals Farm Bureau represents. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.