Agency Priority Goal Action Plan

Rural Connectivity

Goal Leader(s):

Jacki Ponti-Lazaruk, Chief Innovation Officer, Rural Development Innovation Center
Jim Barham, Acting Division Director, Data Analytics Division, Rural Development Innovation Center

Overview

Goal Statement

- o Create and implement innovative solutions to rural connectivity by expanding broadband infrastructure and services. By September 30, 2021, rural broadband investments will leverage over $250 million in non-federal funding through new program rules that encourage more private sector investment, enabling the deployment of innovative solutions and cutting-edge technologies to support precision agriculture, distance learning, and telemedicine.

Challenges

- o Twenty-three percent of the rural population lacks access to broadband at speeds necessary for advanced telecommunications and data transfer capability (FCC, 2020).

- o U.S. population is expected to rise to 400 million by 2050. To supply this number of people with food, American farms need reliable, real-time internet connectivity.

- o Broadband networks are challenging and expensive to deploy in Rural America due to – low population density, challenging geography, bureaucratic obstacles, burdensome regulatory reviews, and lack of private sector investment.

- o This e-connectivity gap prevents Rural America from participating in the global marketplace and limits urban Americans access to innovations and products from rural America.

Overview

Opportunities

o   A recent study indicated that the rural broadband industry supported nearly 70,000 jobs and over $100 billion in commerce in 2015 (Kuttner, 2016).

o   To match world food demand, innovative technologies such as precision agriculture can ensure American farms reach the necessary levels of productivity.

o   High-speed internet access can also address the gap in health services in rural communities. Telehealth and telemedicine allow rural residents to connect to distant healthcare professionals, conduct remote monitoring of chronic medical conditions, and access specialists that may not work in their local health facilities.

o   Remote healthcare through telehealth and telemedicine also reduces the cost of care, improves patient outcomes, and reduces the burden on patients.

o   Unlocking rural prosperity by promoting e-connectivity for all Americans also provides the opportunity to achieve a higher quality of life through modern teleworking, telemedicine and telehealth, and digital learning.

Leadership & Implementation Team

USDA Rural Development APG
Private Sector Investment in Rural Broadband

Innovation Center

Senior Leads:
Jacki Ponti-Lazaruk and
Kellie Kubena

Team Leads:
Jim Barham, Data Analytics Division
Jamie Davenport, Partnership Division
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Telecommunications

Senior Leads:
Laurel Leverrier

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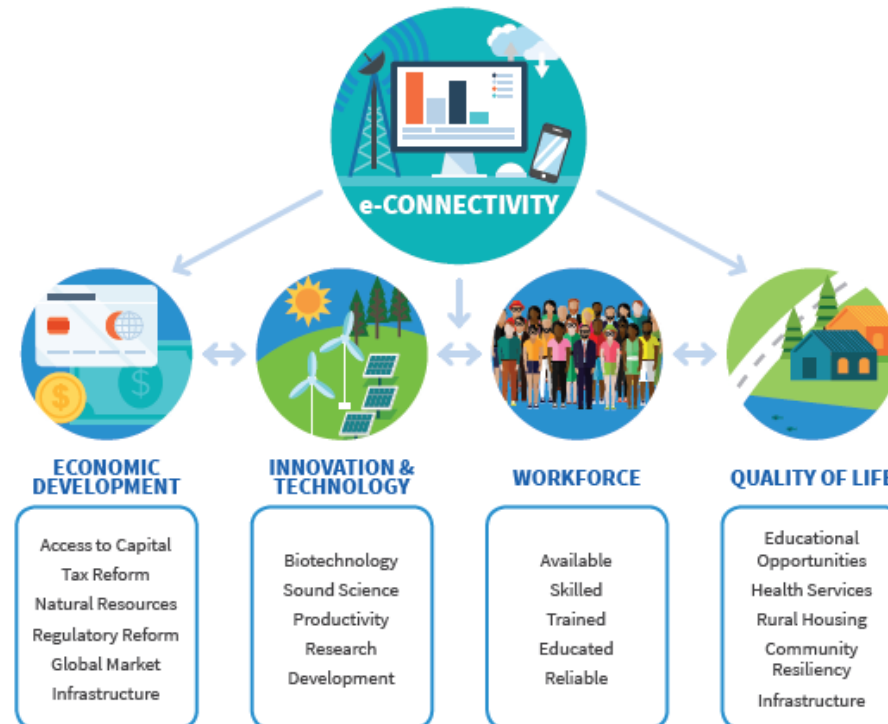Mia Jordan and
Michael Gardner

Team Lead:
Sam Giles

Broadband Federal Funding Workstream – Agency Partners

Appalachian Regional Commission, Federal Communications Commission, Department of Commerce (NTIA), Institute of Museum & Library Services, Office of Management and Budget, Delta Regional Authority, Department of Health & Human Services, Department of the Interior, Department of Treasury, Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Labor, Department of Veterans Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Housing & Urban Development, and National Science Foundation

Goal Structure & Strategies

1. **Leverage Existing RD Programs** to support e-Connectivity :

   - Community Connect Grants: https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/fact-sheet/RD-FactSheet-RUS-CommunityConnect.pdf

   - Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants: https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/fact-sheet/RD-FactSheet-RUS-DLTGrant.pdf

   - Rural Broadband Access Loans: https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/fact-sheet/RD-FactSheet-RUS-FarmBillBroadbandLoans.pdf

   - ReConnect Loan and Grant Program: https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/ReConnect_Program-Factsheet.pdf

   - Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans: https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/fact-sheet/

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Agency Priority Goal FY 2020 Q1-Q2 Data

FY 2020 – Reported in millions ($)

Program	Funding Type	Obligation FY 2020 Q1 & Q2	Non- federal Leverage FY 2020 Q1 & Q2
Broadband	Loan	$0	$0
Community Connect	Grant	$15.8	$5.7
Distance Learning & Telemedicine	Grant	$0	$0
ReConnect	Loan	$100.2	$17.7
ReConnect	Grant	$288.4	$126.2
ReConnect	Loan & Grant	$356.7	$1.6
Telecom	Loan	$86.7	$9.5
Total		$847.8	$160.7

FY 2020 – FY 2021 Goal - RD rural broadband investments will leverage over $250 million in non-federal funding.

Summary of Progress – FY 2020 Q1-Q2

Key Activities by the RD APG Team for FY20 Q1 included:

- Loan and grant funding totaling over $714 million has been awarded to 81 projects serving unserved rural communities across 34 states.

- Development of an APG action plan for FY 20-21 which includes:
  - Five primary strategies for achieving the APG
  - Three key milestones to monitor progress
    - Establishing measurement plan
    - Hosting funding workshops and webinars
    - Announcing funding available for Round 2 of ReConnect
  - Establishing FY19 baseline of RD Telecom leveraged funds
  - Development of key indicators including supporting measures and contextual indicators
  - An assessment of data accuracy and reliability

- Submission of the ReConnect round 2 FOA to Federal Registry

Note: *Not all funds obligated during Quarter One.*

Summary of Progress – FY 2020 Q1-Q2

Example Press Release :

- "USDA to Make $550 Million in Funding Available in 2020 to Deploy High-Speed Broadband Internet Infrastructure in Rural America"

- **STANTON, Iowa, Dec. 12, 2019** – U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue today announced the availability of a second round of $550 million in United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Reconnect Pilot Program funding appropriated by Congress. The application window for this round of funding is set to open Jan. 31, 2020. Secretary Perdue made the announcement alongside Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds while congratulating the Farmers Mutual Telephone Company of Stanton, Iowa, for receiving $6.4 million in first-round Reconnect Pilot Program funding to connect 477 households, 35 farms and 21 businesses in Montgomery and Page counties.

- Link: https://brianallmerradionetwork.wordpress.com/2019/12/12/12-12-19-usda-to-make-550-million-in-funding-available-in-2020-to-deploy-high-speed-broadband-internet-infrastructure-in-rural-america/

Summary of Progress – FY 2020 Q1-Q2

Key Activities by the RD APG Team for FY20 Q2 included:

- Loan and grant funding totaling over $847 million has been awarded to 96 projects serving unserved rural communities across 36 states.

- For Rural Development's newest broadband program ReConnect - USDA had invested in 70 projects. The investment represents $621 million in grant and loan funding for high-speed broadband infrastructure. The funded service areas include a total of 157,562 households.

- Rural Development hosted 4 in-person outreach events in 4 different states (Washington, Colorado, Georgia, and Virginia). One in-person outreach even was hosted in each of Rural Development's regions.

- In addition to in-person activities 8 webinars on the application process for ReConnect are posted to the ReConnect website : https://www.usda.gov/reconnect/application-webinar-materials

Summary of Progress – FY 2020 Q1-Q2

Example Press Release :

- "USDA Invests $28 Million in Broadband for Rural Virginia Communities"

- **BUCKINGHAM, Va., Feb. 28, 2020** – Today, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development State Director for Virginia Beth Green announced USDA has invested $28 million in high-speed broadband infrastructure for more than 17,000 rural households in Virginia. This is one of many funding announcements in the first round of USDA's ReConnect Pilot Program investments.

- Central Virginia Electric Cooperative will use a $28 million ReConnect Program loan and grant combination to construct a fiber-to-the-premises network encompassing 704 square miles. The service area is expected to reach 17,023 households, 35 pre-subscribed businesses, 20 pre-subscribed farms, 15 educational facilities, 15 critical community facilities and six health care centers in Albemarle, Amherst, Appomattox, Buckingham, Campbell, Cumberland, Fluvanna, Greene, Goochland, Louisa, Orange, Prince Edward and Powhatan counties.

- Link: https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/02/28/usda-invests-28-million-broadband-rural-virginia-communities

Summary of Progress – FY 2020 Q1-Q2

Example Blog Post:

- "A Uniquely Alaskan Solution to Bring Broadband to an Isolated Gulf Community"

- Imagine building a broadband network where there are no roads to move supplies, or electrical grids to power cellular towers. Yakutat is an isolated community of about 650 tucked into a sheltered bay off the Gulf of Alaska, disconnected from the road system, and hundreds of miles from Alaska population centers. For Yakutat, which has a substantial Alaska Native population and struggles with a fifteen percent poverty rate, modern conveniences like fast internet are unavailable.

- Cordova Telecom's solution is to install five towers on mountaintops and refuel them annually via helicopter - truly an Alaskan solution to a uniquely Alaskan problem. In early December we announced we're partnering with Cordova Telecom Cooperative through USDA's ReConnect program and providing them $18.88 million to expand their broadband network over 200 miles to their neighbors in Yakutat.

- Link: https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2020/01/13/uniquely-alaskan-solution-bring-broadband-isolated-gulf-community

COVID -19 Changes

Operational Changes:

- USDA Rural Development has taken a number of immediate actions to help rural residents, businesses, and communities affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

- USDA Rural Development has adapted its program outreach and deployment to be fully operational in a telework/virtual environment.

- The ReConnect Post Award Workshop for Round 1 awardees was moved to a virtual webinar series.

CARES Act:

- Rural Development was provided an additional $25 million in the CARES Act for the Distance Learning and Telemedicine (DLT) grant program.

- Applicants eligible for DLT grants include most state and local governmental entities, federally recognized tribes, nonprofits, and for-profit businesses.

- The legislation also includes $100 million in ReConnect grants to expand access to broadband in rural America for educational purposes, business, and access to critical telehealth services.

Goal Structure & Strategies – cont'd

2. **Rural Broadband Program Rule-Making:** Support the implementation of the new rules, which ensures that private providers that participate in the program have a significant capital invested in the projects.

3. **Utilize E-Connectivity Toolkit and Other Online Resources:** Toolkit features 27 USDA programs that support broadband deployment. The easy-to-use resource is a simple guide that allows customers to identify their type of e-Connectivity project and locate resources the federal government offers for planning, equipment, construction, research and other e-Connectivity projects.
(https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/508_RDeConnectivityToolkit121918.pdf)

4. **Targeted Outreach:** Rural Utilities Service has included in their FY 2020 mission area goals that each State host or participate in at least one broadband workshop. Innovation Center's Partnership Division is helping coordinate and host these broadband workshops.

5. **Mission Area Key Performance Indicator 4.1.2**: Focuses on increasing awardees/subscribers access to new and/or improved telecommunications services; KPI goal for FY20 is 160,000 awardees/subscribers per year.

Key Milestones – Rule-Making

- **Rural Broadband Program Rule-Making:** Support the implementation of the new rules, which ensures that private providers that participate in the program have a significant capital invested in the projects.
- This strategy includes new regulations and funding opportunity announcements via the federal registry.

Milestone Summary					
Key Milestone	**Milestone Due Date**	**Milestone Status**	**Change from last quarter**	**Owner**	**Comments**
ReConnect Round 2 FOA	Q1, FY 2020 12/2020	Complete		IC and RUS	Published in Federal Registry
Rural Broadband Program Regulation	Q2 FY 2020 03/2020	Complete		IC and RUS	Published in Federal Registry
Community Connect Regulation	Q2 FY 2020 03/2020	Complete		IC and RUS	Published in Federal Registry
Telecom Infrastructure Program Regulation	Q1 FY 2021 12/31/2020	On-Track		IC and RUS	Being drafted by program

Key Milestones – Targeted Outreach

- Rural Utilities Service has included in their FY 2020 mission area goals that each State host or participate in at least one broadband workshop. Innovation Center's Partnership Division is helping coordinate and host these broadband workshops.

- The goal is to track the broadband workshops hosted by USDA. Some of the indicators we will track include date of workshop, location of workshop, number of attendees, and types of attendees (if possible).

- The tracking of outreach will require coordination with Rural Development field offices and Office of External Affairs (OEA).

Milestone Summary					
Key Milestone	**Milestone Due Date**	**Milestone Status**	**Change from last quarter**	**Owner**	**Comments**
Rural Broadband Funding Workshops	Ongoing	On-Track		IC and RUS	Need to establish mechanism for tracking workshops
Rural Broadband Funding Webinars	Ongoing	On-Track		IC and RUS	Need to establish mechanism for tracking workshops

Key Milestones – Online Resources

- **USDA Broadband and ReConnect websites** – both provide extensive information and tools on funding available through USDA and opportunities for both rural residents and rural internet providers to share feedback, questions or concerns.

- **Utilize E-Connectivity Toolkit:** Toolkit features 27 USDA programs that support broadband deployment. The easy-to-use resource is a simple guide that allows customers to identify their type of e-Connectivity project and locate resources the federal government offers for planning, equipment, construction, research and other e-Connectivity projects. (https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/508_RDeConnectivityToolkit121918.pdf)

- The goal is to track the utilization of the USDA broadband websites and resources. Some of the indicators we will track include date of access, clicks, downloads, and feedback posted.

- The tracking of outreach will require coordination with USDA Office of External Affairs and Office of the Chief Information Officer to access data related to the indicators we would like to track.

Milestone Summary				
Key Milestone	**Milestone Due Date**	**Milestone Status**	**Owner**	**Comments**
Establish measurement strategy	Q1 FY 2020	Complete	IC and RUS	
Establish plan for data tracking	Q3 FY 2020	On-Track	IC and RUS	Coordinating with OEA and OCIO
USDA Broadband website use/visits	Ongoing		IC and RUS	Track clicks
E-Connectivity Toolkit	Ongoing		IC and RUS	Track downloads
ReConnect website use/visits	Ongoing		IC and RUS	Track clicks

Agency Priority Goal Baseline

FY 2019 Baseline – Reported in millions ($)

Program	Funding Type	Obligation FY 2019	Non- federal Leverage FY 2019
Broadband	Loan	$47.8	$9.4
Community Connect	Grant	$24.3	$3.9
Distance Learning & Telemedicine	Grant	$45.9	$7.9
ReConnect	Loan/Grant	$7.2	$2.4
Telecom	Loan	$181.5	$71.8
Total		$306.7	$95.4

FY 2020 – FY 2021 Goal - RD rural broadband investments will leverage over $250 million in non-federal funding.

Key Indicators – *Please note Indicator List is a work in progress*

Key measure of progress

Non-federal dollars leveraged with each broadband award

Supporting measures

Number of awardees/subscribers receiving new and/or improved telecommunications services

Outreach workshops- dates, locations, number of attendees

Resource access tracking through website

Contextual Indicators

Data on proposed funding service areas – population served, number of businesses, farms, health care facilities, educational institutions, etc.

Data Accuracy and Reliability

The key measure of progress for the Rural Development Agency Priority Goal (APG) is the *non-federal dollars leveraged with each broadband award.* The data collection for Rural Development's APG is well-established. Rural Development reports the percentage of non-federal dollars leverage as one of its Key Performance Indicators at the mission level.

Telecom provides leverage data for their obligations as part of the data that is aggregated for the RD Leverage KPI. This data only includes leverage from their loan programs. The APG key measure of *non-federal dollars leveraged with each broadband award* will include both loan and grant programs. This data is part of the financial record or transaction of the obligation made. This data is accurate and validated by the Chief Financial Office and program staff. The only limitation with the data is that it can be difficult to pull from RD Data Warehouse.

Additional Information

Contributing Programs

The Leadership & Implementation Team slide highlights the other Federal partners that are also providing funding for broadband. None of these organizations/programs contribute directly to Rural Development achieving this APG.

Organizations

- These organizations work collaboratively to better understand the funding needs to support broadband deployment:
  - Appalachian Regional Commission, Federal Communications Commission, Department of Commerce (NTIA), Institute of Museum & Library Services, Office of Management and Budget, Delta Regional Authority, Department of Health & Human Services, Department of the Interior, Department of Treasury, Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Labor, Department of Veterans Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Housing & Urban Development, and National Science Foundation

Regulations

- Rural Development will be soliciting comment from the public regarding RUS Telecommunications Broadband programs in FY 2020

Policies

- It must be rural and 90% of households proposed to be served must not have sufficient access to broadband.

- Sufficient access is defined as fixed terrestrial broadband service at 10 Mbps (megabits per second) downstream and 1 Mbps upstream

- Provide service at a minimum of 25 Mbps downstream and 3 Mbps upstream

Additional Information Continued

Stakeholder / Congressional Consultations

Stakeholders: USDA Broadband site: https://www.usda.gov/broadband

To best bridge the e-Connectivity gap in rural America, USDA wants to hear the thoughts and needs of those individuals living and doing business in rural communities. USDA has provided links for both rural residents and rural internet providers to share their feedback, insights and ideas.

November 7, 2019 Testimony – Rural Utilities Service Administrator – Mr. Chad Rupe provided testimony regarding implementation of Farm Bill 2018 to U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry:

"In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress made substantial upgrades to the Rural Broadband Program. The Farm Bill authorized $350 million in broadband-related funding over five years and sets forth plans for the expansion of high-speed internet access to rural, unserved areas. The Rural Broadband Program now includes grants, loan guarantees, and payment assistance for applicants. We expect an updated rule to be published in winter 2019."

"We have been working closely with the FCC, NTIA, and other federal agencies to coordinate our broadband mapping and other policies. We are analyzing how to best coordinate federally backed broadband programs and activities to promote and support the long-term viability and sustainability of rural broadband infrastructure. In addition, USDA and NTIA serve on the Executive Leadership team of the American Broadband Initiative, the Administration's signature strategy to stimulate increased private investment in broadband infrastructure and services to fill broadband connectivity gaps in America."

In addition to the formal testimony provided by administrator Mr. Chad Rupe provides regular updates to the Senate and House Committees on Agriculture.