



★ ★ ★ HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ★ ★ ★  
**ENERGY & COMMERCE**

CHAIRMAN BRETT GUTHRIE

Communications & Technology Subcommittee

## "Fixing Biden's Broadband Blunder"

March 5 2025

EDIT BY  
ISOC.LIVE

### House Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications and Technology - March 5 2025

#### "Fixing Biden's Broadband Blunder"

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** The subcommittee will come to order. The chair recognizes himself for an opening statement.

Closing the digital divide is a top priority for this committee. Too many Americans, particularly those in rural America, like so many places in my home state of North Carolina, lack access to reliable high-speed broadband with so much of everyday life requiring an Internet connection.

This is a vital need. Since 2020, Congress has provided billions of dollars to connect unserved Americans. The most significant effort is the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act, or IIJA. This massive bill included the \$42.5 billion Broadband Equity Access and Deployment or BEAD program at the National Telecommunications and Information administration, NTIA.

It's been over three years since the IIJA became law, and we're still waiting for the first home to be connected using these funds. I think we should understand how this happened. First, FCC maps that Biden-FCC Chairwoman Rosenworcel said, would be ready in "months", instead took much longer to develop.

Then the Biden-Harris administration saddled the BEAD program with regulations unrelated to broadband to appease left wing interest groups. These included technology preferences, burdensome labor rules, and climate change requirements, to name a few.

Worse, the Biden administration flagrantly ignored the law by forcing states to regulate broadband rates before NTIA would approve their proposals, even though the law explicitly prohibits rate regulation.

These actions did nothing to deploy broadband, but instead created confusion while making the program less attractive to providers and deployment more expensive energy and Commerce Committee. Republicans are committed to fixing these mistakes so that every American has access to broadband as quickly as possible.

That's why today I, along with many Republicans on this committee, introduced the speed to speed act. This bill would eliminate the burdensome Biden regulations so that we can get money out the door, shovels into the ground, and broadband into as many homes as possible. Specifically, this bill would eliminate the unnecessary expensive regulations.

NTIA imposed further clarify the rate regulation by NTIA or any other entity is prohibited, ensure that the program is run on a technology neutral basis. And more efficiently use tax dollars by ensuring that awards to providers are cost effective and that funds are only used for deployment. These changes to the BEAD program can be implemented quickly, provide certainty to the states, and not hinder the progress that states have already made.

And I'm excited to hear that. Secretary of Commerce, Howard Lutnick, just a few minutes ago announced that he's launching a review of the BEAD program to cut red tape, eliminate waste, and make sure Americans get connected faster. I'm thrilled to have him join me in this effort. Reforming BEAD is one important step to ensuring every American has access to broadband, but it's not enough.

We also need to reform the permitting process for broadband projects. If we do not reform this process, all the money will get tied up in burdensome permitting reviews, resulting in more unnecessary delays. For the past three, Congress's energy and commerce, Republicans have introduced legislation to streamline the broadband permitting process.

We have proposed codifying existing shot clocks to provide predictability in state and local permit reviews, exempting previously disturbed lands from duplicative and burdensome environmental and historic preservation reviews, and instilling transparency and urgency in permitting on federal lands.

Some of these bills had bipartisan support and passed the house Last Congress. I wish my Democrat colleagues had been willing to work with us on the most meaningful reforms, which were included in Representative Buddy Carter's American Broadband Deployment Act. I hope this new Congress and the urgency of the moment will inspire bipartisan cooperation on this effort.

And I certainly extend my hand to my colleagues across the aisle. We must do everything we can to remove these unnecessary barriers to deployment. In conclusion, unserved Americans have waited too long for the promise of connectivity, but now is the moment to close the digital divide once and for all.

Today's hearing is an opportunity to hear from stakeholders. About how to address these challenges and how to stop it from happening. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses. I now yield five minutes to my colleague ranking member Doris Matsui, for her opening statement. You're recognized.

**Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank the witnesses for being here today. Also, we all recognize a reliable high speed Internet is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity. It powers our economy. It supports education, it strengthens public health, and it connects us to our loved ones. That's why under the Biden administration, Congress passed the bipartisan infrastructure law investing \$65 billion to close the digital divide.

This include over \$42 billion for the broadband equity access and deployment program, or as we call it, BEAD to bring high speed Internet to tens of millions of Americans who still lack access. Just as critically, Congress also directed nearly \$3 billion in digital equity grants to ensure all communities have the skills, training and technology to reap the full benefits of online access.

During the last administration, NTIA worked diligently with state and local partners to make the most of this once in a generation investment to connect all Americans. Thanks to this diligence. States like Louisiana, Nevada, and Delaware stand ready to put shovels in the ground this year to connect their communities, but only if this administration moves quickly to allow them to go ahead.

Many other states, including California, are hard at work. Launching a fair and competitive award process and implementing digital equity plans so that our federal broadband dollars go to where they're needed the most. Yet. Instead of building on this program, president Trump is actively sabotaging it, delaying and injecting uncertainty into federal broadband programs.

Freezing broadband funding ignores the law and harms the tens of millions of Americans who are counting on these programs to get connected. They can't afford to wait and neither can we. That's certainly true. The Sacramento region, just 20 minutes outside the city, rural communities still suffer major gaps in broadband coverage due to

years of underinvestment head further into the California delta, and the need is just as urgent.

Our farming communities rely on broadband for economic growth, education, and basic quality of life. BEAD is a critical lifeline for these communities, yet Republicans are delaying BEAD so they can water down or outright eliminate protections for affordability, good paying jobs, and climate resilient networks.

These changes will drive up costs for consumers while driving down the quality of service. I'm also deeply concerned by attempts to divert funding from fiber to Elon Musk, Starlink satellite service. Unlike satellite fiber is a gold standard and future proof technology that will grow with consumers' data needs over time.

Granted, some remote areas may be better served using non-fiber alternatives, but existing B guidance already recognizes this. We need smart broadband investments that will last, not short term fixes that can cost taxpayers more in the long run. Republicans claim they're just being technology neutral, but can we trust this when the Trump administration has given Elon Musk nearly unfettered authority to further his business interests by taking over government contracts and dismantling agencies, regulating his companies.

And last week, not a single Republican voted with Democrats to ensure this committee conducts oversight into conflicts of interest like Musk. So forgive me if I find it hard to believe that Republicans will ensure that the Trump administration applies broadband rules fairly. Let's be honest. It seems to me that today's hearing is about Republicans fishing for excuses to toss three years of work into the trash, undermining our efforts to connect every American.

I urge my Republican colleagues to stop the delays, stop the sabotage, work with us to fully implement all federal broadband programs, including BEAD and digital equity. This includes holding the Trump administration accountable for delays, conflicts of interest, and violations of the law. Otherwise, the American people will be paying for Republicans broadband blunders for generations to come.

And with that, I yield the balance of my time.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you. I now recognize the chairman of the full committee, the gentleman from Kentucky for five minutes for his opening statement.

**Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that. And we are going to do oversight of this, and we're going to move forward in this area.

Thank you for what was just said, at three years of effort, and not one inch of fiber has been built, our people are clamoring in our area for local broadband to have access to

the Internet and broadband and, you know, congress appropriates and authorizes spending of this amount of money. And three years into it, for some reason, because not following the law, trying to put more on the law than law requires.

Unfortunately people are just starting to speak up about that now, instead over the last three years.

But, I want to start with introducing Greg Hale from Logan County, Kentucky. He's a great friend of mine. I've known him for a long time, and he really is passionate. He's a believer in getting broadband to rural America, rural Kentucky, particularly rural Logan County, and as if there's somebody better in the country that knows this issue and is also a practitioner of this issue, trying to get it done, they may exist, but I haven't met them yet. You're the best I that I know of. And so, that's why we want you to be here, because we know you can share what's important, the most important part.

But, as I said, I represent rural and growing communities in Kentucky's 2nd District. Access is critical for our students to do their homework, for people to connect with their doctors, and to stay in touch with their friends and loved ones. Connectivity helps boost their communities.

And, the private and public sector investments totaling in the billions of dollars to build out communications infrastructure across the country have yet to close the digital divide for many Americans, including many of my constituents who lacks access to the broadband at home.

On the federal level alone, there are more than 130 broadband programs across 15 different agencies, all with varying amounts of funding and requirements and vary amounts of success. In 2021, the BEAD program had more than 42 billion in taxpayer dollars for broadband expansion in unserved areas. And yet, as I said, not a single inch of fiber -- was 2021, 4 years, so it's four years -- not a single inch of fiber has been laid as a result.

Despite naming Vice President Harris as the broadband czar, the Biden administration failed to deliver on their promise of connecting all Americans through BEAD. By failing to connect even one American, a one size fits all approach does not work as a first step.

The program needs to be reformed to be technology-neutral, so states have the flexibility to choose what technology is appropriate for them. We need to eliminate the burdensome and unnecessary regulations that the Biden administration imposed that have nothing to do with the bill except to slow down the process.

This program has been a failure of mass proportions, and we must act quickly to course correct, so that billions of American taxpayers, the dollars are not wasted. Will people get access to service and in a quicker and prompt way?

In addition to BEAD, today we're going to talk about the FCC's Universal Service Fund, and this program supports broadband service in high cost, often rural areas, aid schools, libraries, rural health centers across the Kentucky, and the country, in BEAD program connectivity for low and income Americans, so they can afford broadband service. The constitutionality of the USF is being challenged in the Supreme Court, and if the court ultimately holds that USF is unconstitutional, the program will come to an end and it will be a devastating outcome if that happens, leaving many Americans without service.

Congress must act to affirm the constitutionality of this program, and hope this is an area where we can find bipartisan agreement to react quickly, if we have to react quickly.

In addition to addressing the immediate need, we also need to address the long-term sustainability of USF. After almost 30 years, Congress needs to reevaluate the role that USF should play in providing support, particularly after the significant investment in broadband over the past five years.

So I really look forward to today's discussion. I appreciate my good friend from Kentucky for many years to be here, and I look forward to the outcome of this hearing.

And Mr. Chairman, with that, I'll yield back.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you, Chairman. Now recognize the gentleman from New Jersey, the ranking member for five minutes for his opening statement.

**Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ):** Thank you, Chairman Hudson.

The bipartisan infrastructure law's \$42 billion BEAD program was designed to ensure every American household can connect to high speed, reliable, and affordable Internet.

Not one Republican on this committee supported those investments. Instead, committee Republicans have done nothing but undermine our efforts to deploy more reliable and affordable broadband. I may regret that today's hearing is more the same with an eye in the rear view mirror.

Just so the record is clear, former Assistant Secretary Alan Davidson and his team at NTIA rose to the occasion to build and implement the largest and most sophisticated broadband program in our nation's history, one with 56 different nerve centers and unique sets of considerations with independent planning and decision making taking place in every single state and territory.

Three states have received approval of their final proposal. Four states have completed their selection of Internet service providers after widely successful application rounds,

and 30 states are in the midst of running highly promising application rounds in six weeks.

However, the Trump administration has not moved one state forward in the process. And this is not a surprise since the administration has instead prioritized dismantling the federal government by gutting agencies and firing federal employees and congressional Republicans have silently watched from the sidelines, and we know that Elon Musk is salivating over the prospect of steering B dollars to his companies.

Just yesterday, the Wall Street Journal reported Musk's, SpaceX and Starlink could receive up to \$20 billion worth of BEAD funding, under new plans being developed inside the Commerce Department. Musk's a grifter and Republicans are going to just stand by and watch.

To be clear, many of the changes our colleagues have suggested for BEAD can be done without delays or mandates. Loosening funding requirements they don't like, while misguided, does not require states to go back to the drawing board, the pauses we see at the Department of Commerce, however, are like shackles on broadband providers in Louisiana, Nevada, and Delaware, who need only basic administrative approvals to begin their work in as little as six weeks.

And instead, companies are sitting on tons of supply with a labor force questioning if there will be work next month.

Now, make no mistake, the current threat to the BEAD program could be avoided, if only Republicans in the Trump administration will get out of their own way and let this program move forward as intended.

This opportunity to connect every American to reliable high speed Internet will not come around again, unfortunately. But I want to yield the balance of my time to Representative Carter of Louisiana.

**Rep. Troy A. Carter (D-LA):** Thank you, Ranking Member Pallone.

In January of this year, Louisiana became the first state in the nation to secure federal funding approval for our plan to deploy \$1.3 billion in broadband and equity access and deployment or BEAD funding.

This achievement is a testament to the bipartisan nature of Louisiana's approach to universal connectivity and illustrates how we all should strive to treat broadband access in our states. The state began the BEAD process under the Democratic Governor, John Bell Edwards. It completed his plan under the Republican governor Jeff Landry, who called this program a generational investment that will create thousands of jobs, drive billions in economic growth, and transform Louisiana's communities in all 64 parishes.

The state's plan will connect approximately 140,000 locations to high speed Internet. Through funding awards to 20 Internet service providers and nearly 70% of the funds awarded to Louisiana companies, more than 90% of these locations are set to transition from zero connectivity to future proof broadband fiber.

Altogether, these broadband investments will drive significant economic growth for the state, creating approximately 10,000 new jobs and generating an estimated two to \$3 billion in new revenue for Louisiana companies. However, since the Trump administration took office just a week after Louisiana received approval for its final proposal, the Commerce Department has withheld final funding approval that would've otherwise put shovels in the ground and just six weeks in my home state.

And now we see reports just yesterday that Commerce Secretary Lutnick is considering wholesale changes to the program that would cut or jeopardize all of the hard work that has been put into this point, allowing significant, significantly more money to go to Elon Musk's satellite services. This unexpected delay has stalled progress, frozen investments made by small Internet service providers and contractors and left rural communities still waiting on the promise of broadband access.

This administration must act and provide the certainty to Louisiana residents and Internet service providers looking for answers and receiving none. We have worked too hard and come too far to start over again. Any action by the current administration that would threaten this progress would be a grave mistake and I yield back, Mr. Chairman

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** The gentleman yields back, assume the Ranking member would yield back.

We've now concluded with member opening statements. The chair reminds members that pursuant to committee rules, all members' opening statements will be made part of the record.

I'd like to thank our witnesses for being here today to testify before this subcommittee.

Our witnesses will have five minutes to provide an opening statement, which will be followed by a round of questions from our members. The witnesses here before us today are Mr. Grant Spellmeyer, President and CEO, ACA Connects, Tom Donovan, President and CEO Competitive Carriers Association, Greg Hale, CEO of LTC Connect, and Sarah Morris, the former acting Deputy administrator for the National Telecommunications and Information administration. Again, thank you all for being here. We look forward to hearing your testimony.

Mr. Spellmeyer, you are recognized for five minutes for an opening statement.



**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Thank you, Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Matsui, Chairman Guthrie, Ranking Member Pallone. It is always an honor to appear before this committee.

America's Communications Association, ACA Connects, proudly represents more than 500 independent broadband and cable operators across the country. We serve all 50 states offering connectivity to nearly one in four American households. Although some of my members serve hundreds of thousands of customers, most of them serve only a few thousand customers, and only in a county or two in one particular state. They remain committed to finding ways to make quality broadband service available and affordable to all Americans. They live in the communities alongside their customers. In the past five years, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have expanded coverage of broadband by 64%.

While my members often prefer fiber builds because of their superior performance and durability, they deploy all available technologies to get the job done.

My members have deep roots in the communities they serve that can be traced back generations. I was explaining this to my children the other day, but folks don't understand any longer why, how cable television started. It started because the largest providers were ignoring rural America, and my members needed a way to bring programming to places where broadcast TV signals couldn't reach. Providers actually dragged cables over the hills in order to bring that signal to customers.

Today it's evolved into to what we see in the broadband world. This history is why many of my members were initially very eager to participate in BEAD when it was passed by Congress. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm has waned due to the way NTIA subsequently implemented parts of the law.

The areas that remain to be served today are the most costly in the country. The job won't get done, but for things like the BEAD program. The reality is, every dollar a provider spends complying with unnecessary regulatory burdens is a dollar that is gone from investment and drives up prices.

By happenstance, ACA Connects has a large presence in town, this week. We're up on the Hill. The timing is good. We really have a simple message. We, my members are ready to finish the job in rural America. We urge Congress to fine tune the program, and to get shovels in the ground later this year.

In order to do that, Congress should direct the NTIA to strip costly and extraneous requirements that are deterring participation, and ensure that states have reasonable flexibility in evaluating the broadband technologies that should be used in each state.

The one thing we can't afford to do is to materially delay implementation. States that are ready to proceed quickly should have the flexibility to do so, beyond the BEAD program itself.

Congress must act to speed up the deployment of broadband by adopting, permitting and right of way reforms. Specifically, we encourage Congress to adopt reforms that encourage consistency in state and local permitting, and to take action to streamline and harmonize permitting policies across federal agencies.

ACA Connects was proud last year to support Congressman Buddy Carter's bill, the American Broadband Deployment Act, and we are also glad that Congressman Pfluger and Soto are leading again this year on the Federal Broadband Deployment Tracking Act.

Backing up to the 50,000 foot level, as you all know, this committee has a long and proud legacy of bipartisan problem solving. As the courts have recently affirmed, Congress writes the laws and federal agencies implement them.

The issues that we are discussing here today, in my opinion, are all ripe for action by this committee. The committee should act to codify clear direction to the federal agencies involved on both of these subjects and move forward quickly. We also urge the committee to apply this approach, let's call it regular order, to tackling other thorny telecommunications issues under its jurisdiction, whether that be universal service reform, or guaranteeing a free and open Internet. Congress has a golden opportunity to codify rules that will remove uncertainty and encourage investment.

And with that, we look forward to working with the Committee.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you.

Mr. Donovan, you're recognized for five minutes for an opening statement.

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Thank you, Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Matsui, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the challenges facing rural communications providers.

CCA members range from small rural providers serving fewer than 5,000 customers, to regional and nationwide operators serving millions, as well as vendors and suppliers throughout the communications ecosystem, connecting communities using all technologies available, including mobile, fixed, wireless, wired, and satellite, every day.

CCA members work to provide high quality broadband services by upgrading and expanding their networks, including in the most remote and hard to serve areas across the country.

I'd like to say take a moment to say thank you for the work to fund the shortfall in the rip and replace program, which created an existential threat to rural connectivity in several areas. We look forward to working with you and the FCC to see this program to completion and continued work on network security.

As policy makers consider the future of rural connectivity, we are at an inflection point. Decisions made today will either advance American leadership in the communications industry, including 5G and future wireless services, and close the digital divide, or risk abandoning critical investments that rural Americans rely on every day.

Decisive action is needed in several key areas.

First, the Universal Service Fund must be sustained and modernized. USF is the most effective tool for bridging the digital divide, including preserving existing networks while work continues to expand broadband access. It is the backbone of rural broadband.

The Supreme Court's review of USF's constitutionality presents a direct threat to connectivity across America. Congress must be prepared to act swiftly to preserve USF if the Court identifies concerns. Additionally, USF should be modernized to broaden the community contributions space to include those that benefit from the networks it supports, and support must be available to maintain and preserve networks.

Second, the 5G fund needs improvements within the USF high-cost fund. The 5G fund is intended to support rural mobile broadband, but needs adjustments to ensure success. Specifically, the 5G Fund must base any transition away from legacy support on availability of ongoing operational support, use updated service and speed eligibility thresholds, and have a budget based on anticipated needs to complete the work.

Additionally, funding decisions must be guided by reliable data with a robust challenge process. Currently, the mobile coverage map is not living up to the promise of your goals in passing the Broadband Data Act.

The fund should also be aligned with other programs like BEAD.

Third, targeted BEAD improvements will maximize deployment. The BEAD program is an important investment in rural broadband, but its implementation must allow flexibility and technology choices. BEAD should empower local providers, who know their communities the best, to select the technologies that make the most sense for each situation, including fiber, wireless, and satellite.

Additionally, policymakers should avoid conditions that make BEAD participation prohibitively challenging, and maximize the program's impact by reducing permitting delays and ensuring BEAD funds are not taxed as income.

Fourth, restoring spectrum auction authority is urgent. It's been nearly two years since the FCC's auction authority expired. This delay threatens America's wireless leadership. Congress should not only reinstate auction authority, but also ensure there is sufficient spectrum available for full power commercial use, and build on policies that ensure carriers serving rural America have a meaningful opportunity to secure spectrum.

Policymakers should also maximize the utility of spectrum currently available for wireless use, including increasing power levels in the CBRS band to better serve rural America.

Finally, siting and permitting reforms can accelerate deployment. As Congress explores ways to support deployment through broadband programs like BEAD and USF, updates to siting and permitting processes should align and enhance those initiatives. CCA members need permits from federal, state, and local authorities, depending on the area, to deploy, maintain, and upgrade their networks. Current processes for acquiring the necessary permits from various agencies can take months or even years. Efficient, manageable, and predictable permitting processes will be increasingly necessary to process the volume of applications and workload, which will inevitably come with the rollout of BEAD and other programs.

In closing, every CCA member has an interest in ensuring that all Americans have access to the latest broadband services, especially those in rural and high cost areas. CCA is committed to working with all stakeholders to accomplish the challenging task of promoting broadband connectivity for millions of consumers in rural America.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing, and I welcome any questions.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you.

Mr. Hale. You're recognized for five minutes for an opening statement.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Thank you, Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Matsui, Chairman Guthrie, Ranking Member Pallone, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing, focused on how best to promote access to broadband.

I'm Greg Hale, CEO of LTC Connect in Auburn, Kentucky, incorporated in 1954. LTC Connect is a smart rural community cooperative, owned by our members. We provide up to five gigabit broadband, Internet, and voice services to an area of more than 500 square miles in rural south central Kentucky.

We are members of NTCA, the Rural Broadband Association, which represents about 850 rural broadband providers that are delivering broadband services in deeply rural

communities. NTCA members collectively serve less than 5% of the population of the United States, but nearly 30% of its landmass.

Today I would like to emphasize the essential mission of universal service, which is not just getting Americans connected, but keeping them connected. If we do not meet this challenge, we will see hearings like today being held 5 or 10 years from now, asking how we missed the mark.

The rates that rural consumers pay are rarely sufficient to cover the cost of building and operating a network. The single biggest challenge to connecting rural America and keeping it connected is simply making the business case to build and operate any broadband network at all.

This is where the high cost USF program, created at the FCC to fulfill the requirements of Congress's 1996 Telecom Act, hits the mark. With USF support, providers can make a business case for delivering and sustaining broadband services for rural citizens at affordable rates. Rural providers have been able to leverage grant funding to get to some locations previously unserved.

Most grants require some percentage of capital match. Many projects like ours at LTC Connect do not involve grant funding at all, but leverage the use of loans or private capital. Projects are undertaken after a business analysis that involves the continued receipt of universal service funding. USF does not reimburse capital expenses immediately, but reimburses expenses gradually over the depreciable life of the network. For NTCA companies, this cost recovery often takes place over a period of 18 to 30 years.

Unfortunately, USF programs are under attack, and the sustainability and affordability of connectivity for millions of rural Americans is at risk. A 9-7 Fifth Circuit decision declaring the USF contribution method unconstitutional is now before the Supreme Court for review, and a negative decision could have devastating impacts for broadband in rural America. A recent NTCA Member Survey shows rates could skyrocket to an average of \$165 a month, where service even survives, and all new investment is chilled.

We urge all members of Congress to stand ready to support legislative efforts that could help ensure that rural Americans stay connected, while also reforming USF contributions, so all that benefit from universal connectivity do their part.

The BEAD program is of great importance, and, if executed effectively, will provide required capital to reach most, if not all, unserved Americans. Many NTCA members are actively evaluating participation in the program.

There are parts of the BEAD program that should be closely examined for modification. These changes need not reconstruct the program from scratch, but just recalibrate as

the program continues to move forward to serve those in desperate need of broadband.

First, I would recommend that NTIA consider publishing all waivers that have been granted to various states, and consider whether these can be made available to all states.

NTIA could also develop a more reasonable approach to the low cost option, that better reflects the challenging economics of rural areas.

Additional considerations may include relaxing the letter of credit requirements, relaxing workforce obligations, and other policy changes that do not relate directly to the deployment of broadband.

It's important to use every tool in our toolkit to achieve the BEAD program's mission. We will not get the same kind of networks everywhere, but this does not mean we should settle for the lowest common denominator either. Since dial-up Internet was launched over 30 years ago, we have consistently underestimated the amount of speed and capacity customers will require in the future. Robust networks that can provide what businesses and customers need today, and what they will need well into the future, should be the goal, even as we empower states to make the best decisions for their unique circumstances.

In my written testimony, I also outline other issues that require attention, including permitting, delays, the accuracy of the broadband map, and the taxing of broadband grants.

NTCA members like LTC Connect are deeply committed to the customers we serve, and, given our track record of success in rural areas, small community-based providers should be seen as a critical component of any strategy to achieve universal service. We look forward to working with you and other stakeholders to ensure that all Americans will experience the many benefits of broadband for decades to come.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address these issues, and thank you for your commitment to getting and keeping every American connected.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you.

Ms. Morris. You're recognized for five minutes for your opening statement.

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Chairman Hudson, Chairman Guthrie, Ranking Member Matsui, Ranking Member Pallone and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

We stand at a pivotal moment in our nation's broadband expansion efforts. Over the last three years, states have made tremendous progress implementing the broadband programs established under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Middle mile projects are under construction with over 4,500 miles of fiber being built. Digital equity grants are being awarded, and states are in the final stages of the 14 step BEAD process set by Congress. Through BEAD, the states are working to connect everyone in America to affordable, reliable, high speed Internet. We are on the verge of historic broadband deployment in each of your districts.

But, right now all progress is at a standstill.

Since the new administration took office, the Department of Commerce has issued no new guidance or approvals. This inaction means that communities in your districts remain disconnected. If we do not restart these programs very soon, we risk throwing away years of careful planning and bipartisan effort in the states.

These investments are critical. The broadband grant programs were designed to overcome the economic and social barriers that have kept the hardest to reach communities offline.

As the subcommittee knows, connectivity isn't just about convenience. It's about access to healthcare, education, jobs, and economic opportunity.

For example, the Department of Veteran Affairs has found that telehealth can be just as effective as in-person mental health treatment. When veterans received improved connectivity, suicide-related emergency room visits decreased by 36%, allowing veterans to receive critical care in the comfort of their homes. For these individuals, broadband access is quite literally a life or death issue.

In rural areas, broadband can transform communities, sparking entrepreneurship, and increasing business revenue, even before shovels hit the ground. Communities see the benefits in North Carolina and Georgia. Fiber companies have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in new fiber manufacturing facilities, bringing jobs and revenue directly to these states, and, by boosting domestic manufacturing capabilities, these programs ensure, for example, that US AI data centers will be connected with American made fiber rather than Chinese fiber.

Despite these investments, some have expressed concerns about the pace of the BEAD implementation. The reality is that states are almost finished with the 14 step process Congress designed. All 56 states and territories have completed key planning steps, and most are in the final stages of selecting providers and approving project funding. More than half are already reviewing bids from ISPs.

To halt progress now, or worse, for states to redo their work, would be disastrous. It would delay broadband deployment for years, and waste taxpayer dollars. Congress intentionally gave states flexibility in implementing BEAD. States know best how to address their unique geographic and economic conditions, and they should be allowed to make the transformative investments that they are poised to do.

States have already addressed the most controversial areas of the law. The law requires ISPs receiving BEAD funding to offer a low cost plan defined by states. In consultation with NTIA, states have already developed reasonable, flexible, market-driven solutions to meet the statutory requirement.

Similarly, the law prioritizes future-proof technologies like fiber optic networks, ensuring that communities receive infrastructure that can meet their needs for decades. However, the law also allows flexibility. If fiber is too expensive in certain areas, states can deploy other technologies, including fixed wireless or satellite service, instead. The three final proposals we've seen reflect the range of ways that states are implementing these statutory requirements.

And, we know that access alone is not enough. Many people, especially seniors, veterans, and rural residents, need support to adopt and use broadband effectively. The law includes digital equity grants to help individuals gain digital skills, access devices, and feel safe online.

These programs are already well underway. Cutting or delaying these efforts would undermine the entire purpose of the broadband expansion, ensuring that everyone in America can fully participate in the digital economy.

We are closer than ever to closing the digital divide. More than half the states are actively soliciting bids to deploy broadband, and three states have completed every required step in the BEAD program.

But, without action from the Department of Commerce, these efforts are stalled.

Congress must ensure that states can proceed with their plans. We have a rare opportunity to connect every home, every farm and business in America to high speed Internet. Let's not squander it.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you.

I now recognize myself for five minutes to ask questions. Ms. Morris, you were a senior advisor at NTIA when the BEAD Notice of Funding Opportunity was developed and implemented. You know as much about this program as anybody. So, I appreciate you



being here with us today. Was it NTIA's decision or the White House's decision to include the fiber preference?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** So, it's a complicated question to answer. The NOFO? It was NTIA's decision. The Assistant Secretary signed off on the NOFO and released it, and a lot of discussion went into the preparation and decision making behind the NOFO.

As NTIA was drafting the NOFO, a lot of factors went into how each equity was threaded, and the ultimate goals of the program that we wanted to achieve. And, the goals that we wanted to achieve were to push fiber as far out as economically possible, and to allow other technologies, which we recognize would be important in reaching the goal of connecting everyone in the country to affordable, reliable, high speed Internet -- to allow those technologies to be a part where fiber was not economically feasible.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Gotcha. Did the extraneous requirements on labor and climate come from NTIA or the White House?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** The entire NOFO came from NTIA and was signed off by leadership at NTIA

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Appreciate that. And so, then it was NTIA's decision to force states to regulate rates, despite the law's prohibition for that, or was that from the White

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** House??

The law is very clear that every state is required to set a low cost option in consultation with the Assistant Secretary, and in consultation with NTIA, and with approval of the Assistant Secretary, and NTIA followed the law in regard to that requirement.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Were you aware that NTIA was violating the law by forcing states to include a rate or formula for a rate in their initial proposals?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** NTIA followed the letter of the law as we interpreted it.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Okay. Well, I appreciate that answer.

Mr. Spellmyer, I've heard from many providers that plan to participate in the BEAD program, that these unnecessary requirements will continue to delay broadband deployment. Do you agree that removing labor requirements, rate regulation, climate standards, as well as streamlining permitting, will speed up the broadband deployment?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Yes. Mr. Chairman, my members support all of those items you just listed. It's certainly been a... In some of those instances, it causes

delay, in others, it increases prices, costs, and therefore the number of areas you can cover.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** I agree with that.

Mr. Donovan, NTIA has not administered the BEAD program in a technology neutral way. How has the lack of tech neutrality in BEAD affected CCA's members?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** As our members look at the opportunities for BEAD, they're just asking to be able to use every way they possibly can to connect their neighbors. I think they know their geographies, they know the challenges. They know if you need to go around a river, they know where wireless makes the most sense, they know where to put fiber.

So, just asking for that flexibility.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Well, you know, my state experienced a devastating hurricane last fall. We had folks disconnected from loved ones for days, unable to reach emergency workers for help. What can we do to restore connectivity faster during recovery efforts in the future?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Yeah. As we work with our members, especially in North Carolina, and in places where entire wired networks were completely washed away, restoring wireless and mobile services is an immediate way to provide connectivity. And, what would be really beneficial for that is making sure that those carriers can use their spectrum resources most efficiently to connect their neighbors and their communities.

So, that includes things like taking spectrum licenses they have in the CBRS band and being able to use power levels that are comparable to neighboring bands. That allows signal to go three to five times further from the same tower. So, things like that would be really helpful to make sure you can restore services immediately.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** I appreciate that. I'll now recognize the Ranking Member of the committee, Ms. Matsui for five minutes to ask your questions.

**Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA):** Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman.

Roughly one in five American households lack access to high speed Internet. They can't afford to wait on broadband. Yet, Republicans are risking changes to the BEAD program that would delay and weaken this once in a generation investment.

This is even more frustrating when states are nearly at the finish line. States like Louisiana, as Mr. Carter said, you know, they're ready to push shovels in the ground in a

matter of weeks. And, what happens if the Trump administration gets out of their way? If they get out of their way, then they can do that.

Ms. Morris, what is at stake for American people if BEAD funding is further delayed and disrupted?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you Ranking Member for the question.

Everything's at stake, and this is a once in a generation opportunity. I don't believe that we will ever again get 42 and a half billion dollars to connect every corner of the country to high-speed, affordable Internet. And, without access to high speed affordable Internet, communities are losing access to healthcare, jobs, education, economic opportunity, and that's being exacerbated every day that we pause this program and fail to put shovels in the ground, especially if states are right on the cusp of doing so.

**Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA):** Right. Thank you. Congress made clear that providers taking federal BEAD dollars must offer at least one low cost plan. Ms. Morris, how would Americans be impacted by Republican proposals to weaken this requirement?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** For investing all of these resources into building these networks, but they aren't affordable to the communities they are designed to serve? Then we are building bridges to nowhere. We're building networks to no one.

And, states have worked through the analysis and done careful planning to understand what affordability means in their state, and have set, have implemented the guidance of the statute appropriately, and in a variety of ways.

**Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA):** Now, I'm also concerned about Republicans attempts to divert BEAD funding from fiber broadband infrastructure to satellite technologies like Elon Musk, Starlink.

The BEAD rules preference for fiber where economically viable isn't just happenstance. Optical fiber infrastructure can support the connectivity needs of consumers for decades, and fiber is a super highway for data intensive technologies such as AI and fixed wireless. Unlike fiber, satellites, need replacement about every five years, and can be wildly more expensive in the long run.

Ms. Morris, why would cutting back on BEAD's investment in fiber technologies risk a two-tiered system? And who would these changes hurt the most?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you. Ranking Member.

As you note, fiber is the platform for our next generation of innovation, and communities that lack access to fiber will continue to suffer.

If you want 5G and 6G connectivity in your districts, you need fiber to your districts. If you want advanced healthcare systems to your districts, you need fiber in your districts. If you want next generation 911 service in your districts, you need fiber in your districts.

Now, nTIA recognized in the BEAD NOFO that fiber is not an economically viable solution for every single household, but the goal of the Notice of Funding Opportunity is to, and the goal of the statute is to, push fiber as far... push high capacity Internet as far as possible, and to rely on other technologies to fill in the gaps where it's not economically viable.

**Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA):** Absolutely. Reliable high speed broadband access is a fundamental pillar of modern life, from rural broadband deployment, to vital programs like Lifeline and E-Rate.

The Universal Service Fund has been a savior for millions of Americans. That's why I'm co-leading the bipartisan bicameral USF Working Group to find solutions and ensure USF remains resilient for years to come. That's why I also joined a bipartisan congressional amicus brief to the Supreme Court defending the constitutionality of USF.

Mr. Donovan, as we expect a decision regarding USF in June, can you describe what the impact to your consumers will be if USF is eliminated, or significantly altered, by the Supreme Court?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Certainly, and thank you for joining 28 of your colleagues on that bipartisan bicameral brief, it was greatly appreciated, and for your ongoing work with the USF working group to provide long-term solutions to that.

Here, to ring the alarm, that there will be immediate problems of connectivity for America's... immediately, if the Supreme Court ends the Universal Service Fund. This isn't waiting for systems to degrade and customers will eventually be cut off. The actions on those impacted that you mentioned, both in high cost areas, low income schools and libraries, there will be immediate devastating effects.

And so, if I can leave you off one thing today, it's that Congress needs to be prepared to immediately act, and to act decisively, to restore this program, if the Supreme Court goes in that direction.

**Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA):** Okay, thank you.

Mr. Hale. Do you agree?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** I agree completely.

**Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA):** Okay, great. Thank you very much.

And, I ran out of time. Thank you. Yield back.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Gentle lady yields back. The chair now recognizes the chairman of the full committee, Mr. Guthrie.

**Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY):** Thank you. I had to come back to see my good friend, Mr. Hale.

So, Mr. Hale? So, Logan Telephone, or LTD Connect, received support from Universal Fund. Would you kind of walk through for the committee, what would happen, impact on consumers?

I know a lot of people have similar businesses to yours. Tell me who Logan Telephone is, and then, it's a co-op, and what would happen if... what would be the impact on constituents and consumers?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Yeah, it would be devastating for...

**Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY):** it's not a for-profit, it's a co-op, I stress that.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Right.

For my company, and companies like mine, you know... We're finishing up a fiber project, now. Within the next few months, we'll be a hundred percent fiber. And, the way the Universal Service Fund works... again, as I mentioned, it's the depreciation.

So, we have huge depreciation expenses, and, if the court ruled, assuming that meant that USF went away completely -- they're, you know, arguing primarily over the contribution factor -- if USF went away completely, then we would quickly have very negative operating income.

And, I'm a co-op, I'm a nonprofit. We don't have to make a profit, but we can't lose money every year. So, it would affect the long term viability of my company. It would affect, obviously, the broadband that we provide to customers today, which is very robust in the customer service that we provide to our members.

**Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY):** Thank you. I appreciate that.

And, Mr. Spellmyer, my understanding is, as we're talking a lot about what's happening here in DC, and the argument is that Congress authorized the money and spent it, and the executive branch is spending the money that was authorized by Congress, we're

probably over three years, almost four, into the BEAD program, and we know that the executive branch is putting restrictions that Congress did not put on to spending the money. I guess we're kind of fortunate that's the situation, because now we have the opportunity to fix it, with trying to get this out.

Would you talk about what the biggest obstacles for participating in the program, and the requirements, what it causes to prevent you from being able to expedite the participation in the program?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Absolutely, Mr. Chairman. And, I would agree with you first, and the good news is this is an opportunity to reset the table and get the job done. As I said in my statement, my members are anxious to do that. I think the requirements that NTIA allowed the states to impose in a number of the areas that have been enumerated are particularly problematic, because they raised the cost of providing the service, be that prevailing wage rates as one, there are a whole number, as we've talked about, climate change related items, that, depending upon how a state has interpreted that, is causing issues.

We all are committed to affordability. We've seen some states that have gone beyond low income affordability to middle class affordability, that are causing issues.

And there are a whole slew of permitting challenges that make it very difficult for my members on a day-to-day basis to build broadband. I was talking with a provider last night from Ohio and talking about how he regularly has a slew of projects that are three years in the queue at utilities because of permitting reform, because of permit, because of permitting problems, so the need for permitting problems.

**Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY):** Let me turn to Mr. Hale. Have you heard similar things from other providers? You've experienced similar things? Or, has the Commonwealth of Kentucky done things that make it difficult for you for us to use this program?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** There have definitely been issues in the Commonwealth. There are other states that it's much worse.

**Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY):** What are our issues? What is our executive branch putting on that?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Well, it's then environmental and historical, the timing on environmental, seven or eight months, once you maybe get approval from projects. This is going back, like USDA projects, ReConnect. We've had issues with the Army Corps, in sometimes, you know, taking 18 months to get approval to attach to an existing pole line that's already there. You just need to add anchors to string fiber.

So, we have had those areas, and, you know, the business plan for the areas that are left is tough. Any provider's going to be taking a pretty good risk, because we don't really know what it's going to cost to build these networks when all the money starts flowing, so's the low hanging fruit, spending risk.

So, any burden that you add, or any requirement that's not absolutely necessary, hurts the business plan to build these last high cost areas.

**Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-KY):** Thank you, that's helpful. And I will yield back.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you Mr. Chairman. The chair now recognizes the Ranking Member of the full committee Mr. Pallone for five minutes to ask your questions.

**Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ):** Thank you, chairman.

A report from the Wall Street Journal yesterday indicated that the Department of Commerce is considering changes to the BEAD program that could award nearly \$20 billion of BEAD funds to Starlink, a service that is already available to every single American today, and anyone who wants to sign up can do so with it, without a dime of taxpayers' money.

The BEAD program was designed to overcome barriers, dividing the communities that are economically feasible to serve with private capital from the communities that are not, while also ensuring those on the wrong side of the digital divide are not subjected to second class service.

Now, my question, I have three of Ms. Morris, do you think there is an appetite among states for awarding nearly half of the BEAD program funds to satellite broadband providers?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you, Ranking Member.

I have not heard that type of interest from states. I did not hear that type of interest in my time at NTIA.

But I think, moreover, what I have heard from states, and continue to hear from states, is a desire to move these plans forward that they have spent the last three years working through. They've worked through the FCC maps, they have had their initial proposals approved. They've worked through their sub granting process, and their Internet Service Provider selection process and some of them have submitted their final proposals, and had them review approved by the Assistant Secretary at NTIA.

States are on the one yard line at this point, and they just want the ability to get into the end zone, get these shovels in the ground and get things built, and anything that will set back or create more redundant work on these plans, I think will be frustrating to these state broadband offices.

**Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ):** I liked the football analogy.

Over the past two years, we heard a steady course of fear mongering from a small number of stakeholders, who claimed the requirements of the BEAD program were so onerous that providers would not participate in the program, would fail.

So again, Ms. Morris, what is the level of BEAD participation in states currently, and our providers refusing to participate in application rounds?

Or is it more robust than we were led to believe?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** I mean, I think you just look at the three states that have had their final proposals approved, that have worked all the way through the 14 steps of the BEAD program laid out by Congress, and to see that they have in Louisiana, 95% fiber participation, and other providers filling in the remainder.

Nevada also has robust fiber participation, other providers filling in the remainder. And Delaware, which was able to use all of its BEAD support to build fiber to every home.

**Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ):** Okay.

And then my third question, I think it's good to hear that state broadband offices are seeing such promising levels of participation given some of the rhetoric today, although I am concerned that companies will be discouraged from participating in the Trump administration's redo of BEAD, especially now that we know the Commerce Department is planning to stack the deck in favor of Elon Musk SpaceX this time around.

But, third question, Ms. Morris, if the Trump administration forces states and Internet service providers to restart the BEAD process from a square one, what effect would that have on states and providers confidence in the future of the program?

And what would that mean for consumers?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Well, I think a dramatic reset of the program, that involved redoing any of significant amount of work that the states have already completed, would be very challenging for states. States have invested three years of their time standing up broadband offices, navigating the mapping process, drafting their initial plans, working with industry in the state to get these plans to the final stages of the process.



I don't think there's any guarantee, one, that every state would continue to participate, and, you know, it's hard to say what the full impacts of the program would be if we were to walk things back that dramatically.

**Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ):** Alright. Thank you so much. And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** I thank the Ranking Member, the chair now recognizes the Vice Chairman of the subcommittee.

Mr. Allen, you are recognized for for five minutes to ask your questions.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you for being here today, and as we talk about implementing this important program that we've been working on for some time in Congress.

During my time in Congress, we've worked continuously in to expand rural broadband across my district, and we have made great progress, particularly with our co-ops and whatnot, using the Universal Fund, but, where we have for-profit companies, you know, obviously we are having to use other funding methods.

The BEAD program provided 65 billion in additional funds to support broadband activities. It's brought the total amount provided by Congress for broadband to well over a hundred billion dollars. BEAD was full of unnecessary requirements, and, as a result, not a single inch of fiber has been laid with these funds.

And then, all of a sudden, we're talking about the new administration, which I think he got confirmed about two weeks ago, you know, that's interesting.

But, you know, and we're seeing, you know, Georgia's a Right-to-Work state, and so we are seeing now in government projects these project labor agreements, which are very complex. In fact, if you actually have a bidder on your project, and he is the low bidder, and the government can dictate that, okay, you don't have a project labor agreement, so they give it to the next contractor.

I mean, are we seeing that kind of stuff in these programs, Mr. Spellmyer?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** We absolutely are, Congressman, and, as I've reflected on the dialogue here back and forth.

So, ACA Connects has a study we did in 2023, that I believe we shared with NTIA, that estimated that the cumulative layering of all this was approximately 60% additional cost.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Wow.

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Now, the actual reality is, as we've come further, we're seeing differences across the states...

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Yeah.

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** As it has played out. But, I just heard yesterday from one of my members in Pennsylvania that the prevailing wage issue there alone was driving almost a 70% difference in the state of Pennsylvania for my providers.

There's lots of stuff out there.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** The other thing, as it stands now, do many ACA Connects members plan to participate in BEAD because of this unnecessary burden.

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** There are some that are participating. There were many more that were initially interested. As I talked with them this week, they want to come back, and they want to come in.

And, the good news is, I don't think we need to restart the process, as has been suggested.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Right.

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** I think we can move expeditiously to strip out the stuff that needs to be stripped out, and then get about the business of finishing it. I think NTIA could grant waivers, either through NTIA or the Department of Commerce, that would allow states to proceed, but remove some of the provisions.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Yeah, because we're seeing this in the DOGE effort today, about the excessive cost of doing business, and waste of taxpayer money by the federal government.

Mr. Hale, are you seeing the same thing in Kentucky?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Not as much. Of course, we're not as far along.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Yeah.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** But, you know, that's definitely a potential issue, we could see that. We hope we don't.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** What is one barrier, Mr. Hill, that you would like removed to do as far as deployment is concerned, either related to BEAD or not?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** You know, to be honest, the Kentucky office has been open and flexible to try to follow the NTIA guidelines, and not make them any more burdensome. I mean, they're they're walking the line. They want to get the job done in Kentucky.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Yeah.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** But, obviously, the permitting, the low cost option, we've got a lot of flexibility in Kentucky, but there are states that don't, you know...

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** yeah.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** And a lot of NTCA members have problems, and it will restrict them from participating in BEAD.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** How about you, Mr. Donovan?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** I think some of the workforce issues. From an industry overall, we do not have the workforce that we need to complete this across the country, and that's why we've been pleased to work with partners, like groups like Warriors4Wireless, that are helping transition vets into wireless tower climbers, programs at NATE and WIA and other partners.

But, the bigger picture is that we need more workforce education. We need more workers in this industry.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Yeah. We got 7 million open jobs in this country right now. And everybody's screaming about, you know, layoffs and all that stuff. I mean, it's ridiculous. But anyway, all right.

Well, I'm out of time and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you.

The chair now recognizes representative Soto for five minutes to ask your questions.

**Rep. Darren Soto (D-FL):** Thank you, chairman.

You know, I was proud to be able to vote for the American Rescue Plan, which already started delivering a rural broadband to areas of my district, like Deer Park, Bull Creek,

Kenansville. One of my constituents even wrote to Spectrum, which is doing some of this work: "Good afternoon, everyone. I had to just share my excitement with you all after an entire lifetime of not being able to have so much as a phone line at a rural Osceola County Kenansville home, as of today, we now have Wi-Fi. As I type this, Spectrum just finished installing it."

It is incredible to experience firsthand the very goal that we all contributed to beginning some time ago. I know it's not complete for everyone yet, but it still is amazing.

Tiffany Chapman is on the Double Z Bar Ranch in South Osceola, is a sixth generation Osceolan..

And, unfortunately, my colleagues across the aisle, they all voted no on that bill, and then we got together to pass the rural broadband program that we're talking about today, the BEAD program. I'd call it the bipartisan infrastructure law.

But, every single Republican on this committee also voted no on that bill, and so, to hear things like suddenly now you're the champions of rural broadband, I think you guys call that fake news, right?

We need to work together, and I think it's great.

Look, if we would've sped up the program, y'all would've said there was fraud or waste. Since the program was, you felt, too slow, now it needs to be more efficient.

The reality is we had to go through maps, the states presented plans, and we're moving forward. But, I suppose it's better late than never. And, we welcome the bipartisan help.

The good news is that the states are ready, the plans have been approved, we're queued up to deliver for rural America.

But now, the Trump administration wants further reviews, further delays, and you're still talking about Biden.

I got a great name for this hearing, "Stopping Trump's Broadband Plunder", as an alternative, because we see delays.

And then, I'm worried. Is this going to go into billionaire tax cuts? Is it going to be moved to other areas?

You know, this delay, 45 days and counting, is a big concern.

Now, we work both with broadband, we work with satellite, in our area. We know fiber is faster, it is costly in some areas, and so we had a balance. We saw the FCC adjust, with the NTIA, to allow for some satellite Internet to be part of this 4.1 billion, it's even part of Florida's plan, but we know broadband is the foundation of this.

And so, Ms. Morris, the states have submitted their plans. Do you feel like they're ready to go? It seems like you think they are.

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** I absolutely think they're ready to go. They've invested years and upon years of work into these plans, have worked with the providers in their state, have worked with other stakeholders in their state, and have worked with NTIA, and are ready to get shovels in the ground, as we heard from Congressman Carter from Louisiana.

**Rep. Darren Soto (D-FL):** Now, do you know why the funds are still frozen, 45 days into the Trump administration?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** I don't have any insight to how the current administration or the current leadership at the Department of Commerce is overseeing these funds.

**Rep. Darren Soto (D-FL):** Have you seen any public statements by the current NTIA officials about why the funds are frozen?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Other than today right before this hearing? A desire to take another look at the program and reevaluate? No.

**Rep. Darren Soto (D-FL):** And, what do you think this would mean as far as delays? Do we have any timetables as far as how long these delays could go? Have you seen them talk about that?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** I don't have any timetables.

I will say that the scale at which, if the Wall Street Journal story yesterday is correct, the scale of that shift that is proposed in that article, it's hard to know exactly how that would play out, but could involve a pretty significant reset of the program, and going back and asking states to redo their plans.

**Rep. Darren Soto (D-FL):** Based upon your experience from working at NTIA, how long do you think that could set back if they have to reassess all these plans?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Years.

**Rep. Darren Soto (D-FL):** So, you couldn't even tell us. It'd be an uncertain amount of time that we could see delays for a program, that today they're talking about how there

are delays, and yet what is happening right now at this very moment, with the Trump administration, is causing uncertain delays.

Mr. Chairman, you know, we want to work together, we want to get this done. You have rural areas, I have rural areas. A lot of my friends across the aisle have rural areas. We want to make sure this thing gets moving forward.

And, if we have to have states redo all these plans, I know North Carolina, I know New York, and I know Florida would be upset by that. So, I'm committed to work with you and others to try to get this thing moving, and this is the challenge to face our community today.

And I yield back.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Appreciate the gentlemen, appreciate your comments. Look forward to working with you on this.

The chair now recognizes Representative Latta. You are recognized for five minutes to ask your questions.

**Rep. Bob Latta (R-OH):** Well, thanks very much, Mr. Chairman. Thanks everyone for being here this afternoon, and this is a really important topic. I've been very fortunate to be on the subcommittee since the day I joined this committee back in 2010, and we're talking about broadband and getting it deployed is one of the things that we have talked and talked about, and I think it's important that we get this thing solved so we can get it done.

Because, I think that we had statistics out there, there are about 8 million families across this country that don't have access to broadband. If you don't have broadband, not only for schoolwork, for telehealth, and you think about small businesses, especially in my district, if you don't have broadband, you're done.

So it hurts the small communities, because those small communities have a problem. And, you know, all of a sudden this company goes, you know, what if I can't, if I don't have broadband, how am I going to connect with the outside world?

And then, when we think about the connectivity we need to have for our farmers, and the legislation I had in the last farm bill, is important for our agricultural producers, and we want to make sure, and another piece I'm working on right now, when you think about keep moving, that so our rural folks out there can have that broadband deployed.

But, you know, there's the problems that we have.

And again, before I can ask a few questions, you know, A report came out in 2022 from GAO that we have a hundred over 130 different programs administered by 15 different departments and agencies for broadband. It's crazy. You know, why not just have one. Couldn't we do things faster? But, instead of having 15 different departments and agencies, and you talk about limited resources out there and fragmentation, that's a problem.

And, you know, then we had the issue several years ago with the FCC maps, and they get brought off the maps. And, I remember, I called the Commission, and I said, Hey, to tell you this, when they asked us to look at the maps, they said what do you think? And I said, I'm going to tell you what I think. They're wrong. They had, like the entire state of Ohio being covered.

And so, we invested \$7 million at that time to do something about broadband, and we're up to about \$98 million the last time I saw them, making sure we had accurate maps.

And so, one of the things I'd just like to ask, you know, as we have the folks here, when you're thinking about on the broadband on deployment and those maps, and what the FCC's changed, because I know when the commissioners were in here in the last Congress, I asked them, are the maps working? And there was pretty much uniformity among the Commission at that time that, you know, they thought the maps were working.

But, can I just go down the line and just ask everyone a simple question. Do you think the maps are working for everyone out there right now?

Mr. Spellmeyer?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** My members believe that the wire line maps have been improved substantially.

I've testified in front of both the House and the Senate about many challenges in the wireless world, previously.

**Rep. Bob Latta (R-OH):** Mr. Donovan?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Hey, I'll pick that up right there, that there has been a lot of improvement on the wired, on the fixed maps. There's a lot of work left to go on mobility. To put some data behind that, you know, in the Broadband Data Act set up processes to challenge these maps, so if you or your constituents know that the map's not right, you have a mechanism to say, look, we have to fix this before we move forward. There's been approximately 3.7 million challenges that were accepted on the fixed maps, and there's about 175 challenges that were accepted on

mobile. So, about a little more than 2 million per cent more challenges that have been accepted.

More work is left to go on the mobile maps, to make sure that we can challenge them and fix them so that they can actually guide where we know mobile coverage exists.

**Rep. Bob Latta (R-OH):** Thank you.

Mr. Hale?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** I would say much improved. There's still significant issues. You know, the wire line's good, it's pretty easy to report. Wireless is a little tougher, and not enough accountability for companies that overstate their coverage, still. There's still significant overstatement of coverage in the map.

**Rep. Bob Latta (R-OH):** Ms. Morris?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Just to echo what others have said on the wire line maps, which is what NTIA was most primarily concerned about, given the statutory mandate to rely on them for the BEAD allocations.

These are the best maps we've ever had in the history of of federal mapping, and they continue to get better with every round of of challenge processes.

**Rep. Bob Latta (R-OH):** Thank you.

And, you know, in my last 36 seconds, here's another one. You know, because I was noticing about the 14 steps, that are here about trying to get everything that everyone has to do through NTIA.

I asked this question. I was back in the district, and I was at a meeting in one of my community colleges, and they're training people out there to go out there and help deploy. But, one of the persons there told me something, that I asked this question to NTIA later. Did anybody consider that?

It takes 18 months to 24 months to get a bucket truck, to even to get somebody up on a pole? And then how about getting people trained? And so, I think when we're looking at what we have got to do out there, we have a lot of work to get done, but this has got to get done quickly. And we just can't keep it up.

And Mr. Chairman, I'm, I've overdone my time and I yield back. Thank you.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** I thank the gentleman.



The chair now recognizes Mr. Ruiz for five minutes to ask your questions.

**Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Today my colleagues on the other side of the aisle can't seem to get their story straight. On one hand, they acknowledge the need to to coordinate broadband programs, which I agree with, but then criticize the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment, or the BEAD, program's timeline to claim President Biden has not acted on the digital divide.

But, let's talk about the facts under the Biden administration. Millions of Americans, especially in rural and tribal communities, have gained access to high speed Internet. These investments are not handouts. They are lifelines to education, healthcare, and economic opportunity.

Through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program, the Biden administration invested \$3 billion towards expanding broadband access on tribal lands. In my district alone, the Cabazon Band of Cahuilla Indians, and the Soboba Band of Luiseno Indians, received over \$820,000, and the Colorado River Indian tribe secured \$28.4 million to connect 1,700 households to reliable high speed Internet.

But, my district is not the only one benefiting nationwide. The Biden administration allocated over \$276 million to 44 tribal communities across 14 states with more projects underway. These benefits don't just benefit the tribal community, these benefit all the surrounding rural areas that are neighbors to these tribal communities.

Ms. Morris, how do federal broadband investments under the Biden administration support economic development, education and healthcare in tribal communities?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you for the question, Congressman, and I appreciate you highlighting the incredible work that NTIA has done to connect tribal communities, along with other departments and agencies throughout the federal government, and in coordination, as you note.

There's more work to be done more money available through the Tribal Broadband Program, and certainly more money available through the BEAD program, to help fill in where those investments have not yet occurred.

And I think, sort of stepping back for a moment, that's the beauty of the way that these federal programs work together.

**Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA):** And so how would it develop the education, healthcare, and economic development in tribal lands?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Well, we know that these the tribal entities face an acute divide, even more acute than many other areas. And, as I noted in my oral testimony and in follow up questions, the access to high speed affordable Internet is a precursor for economic development, access to education, access to telehealth. It is the platform on which all of these key resources live. And, without connectivity, the digital divide becomes a human and basic resource divide.

**Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA):** Yeah, just as you said, it enables telemedicine for remote families, online learning for students, and growth for small businesses and tribal entrepreneurs.

But, expansion must respect tribal sovereignty, and be done in true partnerships with meaningful consultation. Last Congress, I spoke out forcefully against Republican efforts in this committee to change permitting in a way that would cut tribes out of the process, and, if they want to try to tackle permitting reform again, this Congress, I'd suggest they reach out across the aisle and work with us.

I'm game to work with anybody to help bridge this digital divide, but rather than pushing forward the same old tired ideas.

Ms. Morris, can you discuss the Biden administration efforts to streamline permitting and how tribal sovereignty was prioritized in the process?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** I would just say, Congressman, that tribal sovereignty and tribal consultations are bedrock to the ways in which NTIA has engaged with tribes, whether in permitting, or just the sub granting process, through these various and competitive grant making processes, through these various grant programs.

It is something that I hope to see continue at NTIA. They have a tribal office that is made up entirely of folks who come from tribal communities, and that, I think has driven a genuine, authentic commitment to ensuring that tribal sovereignty is...

**Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA):** And what have y'all done to help streamline the permitting?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** We have been working with other federal agencies to identify areas where there are hurdles, whether it's something as simple as a form can't be filed electronically, it has to be filed in paper, to, to getting more capacity, which I think is truly the biggest hurdle here, is getting the capacity in place in the permitting offices to process permits more more quickly and more efficiently.

And that, I think, has to be part of it.

**Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA):** You know what's interesting? I just had a meeting with a utility company. Everything has slowed down because of the mass layoffs. The person that

was working on their permitting for wildfire prevention access and all that, is gone. And so, it's going to take even longer to process this permitting, but yet they're complaining about permitting time, and they're making the problem worse.

Thank you.

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you.

**Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA):** I yield back.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** Thank you for yielding. Next

is Representative Rakus from Florida. I yield five minutes.

**Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL):** Thank you very much. Appreciate it, Mr. Chairman, and I appreciate the testimony today.

When I first started representing Citrus County in 2021, that's in Florida, one of their top three needs was reliable cell phone Internet services, and that's probably true with a lot of the rural areas around the country. In November of 2022, filled with excitement for the anticipated community investment, the Citrus County Chronicle, one of the newspapers there, one of the major newspapers, wrote two newspaper articles, one article on the the promise that the BEAD program provided to the county, and a second article charging residents to review the broadband maps and report errors to ensure accurate funding availability for the county.

Sadly, the slow execution of the BEAD program means that connectivity remains a top concern, and the original hope in the program is turning to disappointment.

Unfortunately, meanwhile, the states have been trying to navigate the process to get the necessary applications and approvals for participation in the program. In October, Florida's initial proposal, Volume Two, was approved by NTIA, starting another one year clock for the state to submit a final proposal.

Mr. Spellmyer, your written testimony outlines some specific changes to enhance the effectiveness of the BEAD program. Would enacting these changes impact the progress that the states have already made under the current program structure? Or can they be folded in seamlessly?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** I would agree that they would help, they would improve the program, the changes that I've outlined, and I think it can be done, let's say nearly seamlessly.

I think we're talking months, let's call it weeks or months, not months and years. I think they can move quickly without tremendous disruption.

**Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL):** Oh, that's encouraging.

Okay, during an NTIA oversight hearing in late 2023, I asked former Assistant Secretary Davidson about the prohibition on rate regulation within the BEAD program. The IJJA included a clear prohibition on rate regulation, and former Secretary of Commerce, Gina Raimondo re-articulated that ban at a Senate hearing.

That same year, Mr. Davidson's response was the same. The law was very clear that NTIA could not regulate rates within BEAD, but subsequently we heard that pressures and incentives were put on states that included rate regulation in their draft proposals.

This question is both for Mr. Hale and Mr. Donovan. I still have some time left. First, Mr. Donovan, your written testimony briefly mentions that policy makers should avoid pitfalls like affordability plan conditions that could negatively impact BEAD participation. Can you expand on how rate regulation harms the marketplace?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Thank you for the question.

So, particularly for rural providers in these markets, and at a time when Universal Service Fund is under threat, that there are external pressures that rate regulation... that these programs can push on the carriers, that they simply can't afford the business case to provide the service at certain levels without the resources, through programs like USF that provide support, to provide reasonably comparable services and rates for those in rural and urban areas, and so it's really important that we don't have some of those requirements, without the support necessary for rural carriers to comply.

**Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL):** Very good. Mr. Hill, you have anything to add?

I'm sorry? Do you have anything to add, please, sir?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** I agree with everything Mr. Donovan just said. There's a bottom line impact. This is about cost to deploy, it's about density. And everything that you layer on makes the case worse.

You want, as policymakers, maximum participation in this program, you want us going to the states and attempting to be the provider selected. And, the more you layer on, the more difficult you make it. And that's what we're seeing play out across across the country today.

**Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL):** Well, thank you very much. I appreciate it.

And I'll yield back. Mr. Chairman,

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** I thank the gentlemen for yielding.

Next I will give five minutes questioning to Representative Peters from California.

**Rep. Scott Peters (D-CA):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You know, when I came to Congress some time ago, every single member that I talked to here, Republican and Democrat, wanted to do infrastructure. And, the Republicans in particular were frustrated with the inability to deploy rural broadband, that they were just disconnected.

And, one of my colleagues at the time, she was on the Transportation Committee, she said, Scott, we're going to do a trillion dollar infrastructure bill. And, I just laughed at her. I said, you know, if we could get two or \$300 million for highways, I think that'd be pretty good. But, lo and behold, in the last couple congresses we did, we got a trillion dollar infrastructure bill.

We got all this money for rural broadband, and I want to just want to say that, before I move on to criticizing that, that was quite an accomplishment for this place. And I know that vote was not necessarily bipartisan, but even though Democrats controlled that vote, it was not like we just invested in blue areas, we invested in red areas and rural areas, mostly represented by Republicans. I thought it was a really good thing.

Now, I've sat in this seat and various places on our other subcommittees, and criticized the Biden administration for the red tape that we did not get around, and I think that's a legitimate question to ask, and I'm very frustrated with how slowly we deployed some of these investments, with the money that we put in the bank.

Mostly I talk about energy, but here it is again with broadband.

And, Mr. Hale and Mr. Donovan, maybe you could tell me what you think specifically would be permitting obstacles to bridging the digital divide, and what we can do to, from your perspective, to see that we get shovels in the ground.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Thank you, Congressman.

Well, you know, I think we've mentioned, you'll see it in our testimony, different things that can definitely affect that ability. Again, I mentioned environmental, just the length of them, and those are important things to do, but they just take...

**Rep. Scott Peters (D-CA):** So, I wouldn't know what you mean environmental.

Is that NEPA or is that something else?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Well, specifically like with the ReConnect program at USDA, there's an environmental process at USDA that you have to go through. I haven't been through those. A lot of our friends around the country have, that's one of the big ones.

It's not the process of going through it, it's just how long it takes. Like we said, with the Army Corps of Engineers, we have sometimes with the railroads, we have some issues, but Mr. Donovan, I think, probably with his knowledge of what's going on across...

**Rep. Scott Peters (D-CA):** I did notice probably where there's 17 different agencies who need to be involved with project reviews.

So I mean, I know that's must be very frustrating. But, go ahead, Mr. Donovan.

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** One, it's making sure that there's the resources to process these points that come up. Things like the Broadband Incentives for Communities Act could help provide some of those additional resources to process it.

But it's also, you know, sticking to shot clocks that exist now, to having them be actionable, so that they actually matter, so that these operators have some certainty as they go through the process, that if they do their part, that the federal partners are going to be working with them on the permits, so that there's a collaborative try and get it done.

You know, I hear from some members that they hear from local on the ground that NEPA is used as a verb of, you know, if you try that, I'm going to NEPA you to death. And, you know, that's not the right incentives for me.

**Rep. Scott Peters (D-CA):** You have a sympathetic ear here on that.

I would just say this. I've never thought that just hiring more people was , the way to make things go faster. I think there are process reforms. We need to make things go faster, but when you fire people indiscriminately, it's going to slow stuff down. And what we're seeing out of DOGE now is this incredibly scattershot approach that is supposedly to save money.

Only 4% of the entire federal budget is the workforce. So, you're not really going to save big money out of it, but you really are going to make processes like this, processes at the IRS, you're going to make it a lot more difficult, and it's counterproductive.

I hope my colleagues on the other side know, of all the people here, I really want to work to make these processes faster.

I think the way we're seeing this deployment of cuts to probationary employees, and I've seen this in the Navy, I've seen it at NIH, I've seen it in IRS, is making it harder for Americans.

Let's take a step back. Let's all agree. We want to get rid of waste, fraud, abuse. Let's all agree we want to improve processes. Let's all agree we want to get rural broadband done. But, the way this is happening is really counterproductive. And, I would just suggest that we have the power of the purse, but we also have the power to let the president know what we're hearing.

And, by the way, I think technological solutions might be available here as well, and we have a technologist involved at DOGE. I would much like to see him, much better, rather see him involved in what he knows, which is technology, than what he doesn't know, which is how to manage these agencies.

I yield back.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** I thank the gentleman for yielding, and now yield five minutes from my colleague from Georgia, Representative Carter.

**Rep. Buddy Carter (R-GA):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I thank my colleague from California. I know he's sincere about permitting reform, and I appreciate that very much, but let's face it, the past four years under the Biden-Harris administration has been nothing short of a disaster for broadband deployment and expansion through America, and it's because of the permitting process. Permitting delays have resulted in halting the construction of broadband infrastructure, even in my own district of Georgia, in the first Congressional district.

Take for instance, the Bureau of Land Management in the US Forest Service, frequently exceeding the 270 day deadline for reviewing broadband permitting request on federal lands.

You know, there was a study, and listen to this now, a study conducted by the US Government Accountability Office found that about half of the permitting requests processed by the Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service exceeded the 270 day deadline, and that both agencies currently lack a method of alerting staff appropriately when the deadline is approaching.

Mr. Spellmeyer, let me ask you, how do these lengthy reviews and delays impact Americans access to reliable and high speed Internet?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Well, as I said earlier, Congressman you know, I've talked to providers just last night who were telling me three years is a regular time to sit around and wait for some of this stuff to move through.

I was thinking we all live with shot clocks. I got a shot clock in front of me right now. You've got one in front of you. We have deadlines every year. I got e-File on April 15th. We just need... That alone would make a huge difference.

**Rep. Buddy Carter (R-GA):** You know, you mentioned, I believe in your opening statement, my legislation, the American Broadband Deployment Act that will streamline the broadband permitting processes, and that's a bill that focuses on standardizing regulations, and expediting federal and local approvals, and improving coordination among agencies by cutting red tape. And, if we do this, these reforms will result in accelerating broadband deployment, particularly in rural areas.

You know, I'm a former mayor. I will tell you, you know, it's also the locals that sometimes hold this up, and we need to address that as well. But, it obviously supports economic growth.

Mr. Donovan, how would this legislation, the American Broadband Deployment Act, how would it impact your members and the industry's efforts?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** You're increasing certainty for the operators as they're going through the process, that they know that, if they get to the end of it, there will be a decision. You can proceed with your build, or here's what you need to fix, but you're not sitting in limbo forever waiting. Like, as my colleague said, when the shot clock goes off, you need somebody to blow the whistle to, to make sure that, you know, that's enforced.

**Rep. Buddy Carter (R-GA):** Mr. Spellmyer?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Yeah. And certainty encourages investment and uncertainty discourages investment, and that's what works.

**Rep. Buddy Carter (R-GA):** You know, we've just had a change in administration. I've had so many companies come into my office, and they want the same thing. We need certainty. We need to understand, we need to know, what the future... In order to invest, we've got to know what the future holds, and what's going to be there, and what's not going to be there. And, you know, I was in business for 32 years, and I will tell you, without certainty, it's difficult to make business decisions. I think that's what we're up against.

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** As Mr. Hale said earlier, you know, he's depreciating his investments over 15, 18, 20, 30 years, and it's the same thing for my members. It's really dangerous to make to ask providers to make commitments without that certainty.



**Rep. Buddy Carter (R-GA):** If we were to have this permitting reform bill enacted that we're talking about here, how soon would organizations like your members be able to start serving rural communities that are in need of broadband?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** I am confident we could do that by September 1st of this year.

**Rep. Buddy Carter (R-GA):** Mr. Donovan?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** I'll just add on to that, that the timing of these reviews actually matters a whole lot in a lot of rural America, especially out west, there's places where you can't start the review until a certain amount of the snow is gone from the ground, takes time to process.

And, by the time you get the permit, you may be past your build window, and you can't get back out to those sites until the next summer. And so, that's where the sequencing of this really matters, if you want to make it from an exercise of going through the permitting, to an exercise of deploying broadband.

**Rep. Buddy Carter (R-GA):** Mr. Chairman, I would submit to you that, as many people come into our office, and I don't care what sector of our economy you're talking about, whether you're talking about technology, whether you're talking about healthcare, whether you're talking about energy, it's all the same, permitting regulations crushing us.

It needs to be reformed, and I hope that we can get this bill passed, so that we can have some reform here.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

**Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA):** I thank the gentlemen for yielding. Now I recognize representative Dingell from Michigan for five minutes of questions.

**Rep. Debbie Dingell (D-MI):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for joining us.

Broadband is not a luxury. It's an essential infrastructure that determines whether families, businesses, and communities can succeed in today's economy. I strongly support continued investment in the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment, BEAD, program and other broadband initiatives. As we all know, it's bringing high speed Internet access to underserved areas by funding, broadband planning, infrastructure deployment, and adoption programs in all 56 states and US territories, and we've made a lot of progress with states already implementing BEAD to expand access.

But, let's be clear, the work is far from done. We've have got to ensure that the federal government follows the law, upholds affordability measures for eligible customers, and delivers on the promise of universal broadband. I remain committed to fighting for solutions that make broadband accessible and affordable for every American.

But, I am concerned that the Trump administration, and my colleagues across the aisle, are actively working to delay the broadband implementation to push changes that would directly benefit El Musk by funneling billions of taxpayer dollars to his Starlink service, a blatant conflict of interest.

The Department of Commerce is withholding approvals that would otherwise have shovels in the grounds in states across the country.

The BEAD program demands a comprehensive, efficient, and collaborative approach. We need to be thorough, thoughtful, and deliberate. Michigan's broadband office, like many others across the country, has worked extensively with stakeholders to craft a strategic long-term approach to broadband expansion.

However, concerns have emerged that federal mandates, or sweeping program changes, at this late stage could force states to go back to square one and restart their selection processes, leading to significant delays, and state broadband offices are voicing frustrations over recent delays in BEAD implementation, with many pointing to a slowdown in the approval process at the NTIA and on NIST. These delays are slowing the efforts to get shovels in the ground and connect communities.

Ms. Morris, what steps could this NTIA take to speed up the approval process for state BEAD plans?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you, Congresswoman. The easiest step would be just to push forward the three states who already have plans approved by NTIA, and are just sitting in the queue, essentially, at NIST, should push those through and allow the money to flow, the money to be released, and the shovels to go into the ground.

**Rep. Debbie Dingell (D-MI):** Michigan has led the way in leading BEAD responsibly, but federal interference could slow or even jeopardize the program. My state's telling me this.

Ms. Morris, what are the risks if political interference continues to obstruct federal broadband programs?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** So, you know, the biggest risk I see right now is just timing and momentum.

States are, as I've said, at the one yard line, and they have spent blood, sweat, and tears getting these plans drafted, approved, doing these sub granting processes, all of which is required by the statute. They've been meticulously working through all 14 steps laid out in BEAD, to get to where they are now. Any step backward, one, is going to undo, it's going to be wasteful of all the work that they've already spent. A waste of tax dollar money.

And the confusion that abounds about what that means next, I think is exacerbating concerns within the states.

And I would also say there is a risk that the more fundamental changes that we make to the program, and the more we try to rush a new plan forward, the more we risk outcomes like RDOF, which is now seeing a 37% default rate.

Thank you.

**Rep. Debbie Dingell (D-MI):** Republicans are attempting to rewrite BEAD statutory requirements to weaken its focus on high speed future-proof networks. If successful, these changes would funnel billions in taxpayer dollars to Starlink, despite its well-documented shortcomings compared to fiber broadband.

Mr. Hale, what would be the implications both today, and in the long term, of allowing Starlink and other satellite providers broader access to BEAD funding? Are there any drawbacks to consumers and businesses by prioritizing satellite broadband over fiber technologies?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Yeah, I think you all know I'm a fiber fan. That's what we're building. There is no technology that can match what we can provide for fiber, if we're talking about long term. Yeah, I think it's the best solution in many cases.

That being said, I think you hear a common chorus that we need to use every tool to reach every American, if that's our goal. So, you know, the best thing to do is to absolutely take a long-term view of what that would mean, and I think that's best done at the state level.

They know their locations better, they know their unique circumstances. They know what technologies will work. They don't know what that'll be until they see applications and proposals that come forward. That may include fiber.

So, I think, you know, we need to use every tool in the box to get to every American, and it's going to be a different business case by state. So, giving states the flexibility to do that exercise to figure out what's best long term for citizens in that state's the best approach.

**Rep. Debbie Dingell (D-MI):** Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** The gentle lady yields the chair now recognizes a gentleman from Florida, Dr. Dunn.

**Rep. Neal Dunn (R-FL):** Thank you very much Mr. Chairman. Americans do indeed have every form of technology. Their figuratives for broadband deployment and related applications, including fiber optic, fixed wireless, mobile, and robust satellite systems all are important to Florida. Thank you for those comments, Mr. Hale.

Historically America has done a stellar job at building out telecommunications infrastructure, and much of this was done before commercial entities received any government grants to provide that service. Now we've thrown \$42 billion to broadband in taxpayer money, and we said we need to solve this problem. We haven't laid an inch of fiber yet. Not one single additional customer's been served.

So in fact, I drive around in my district with a purely commercial satellite link in my car, because reliable cell service is absent in half of my district. And, I know there's plenty of healthy competition in our market to, to fix that.

Mr. Spellmyer's testimony on evolving technology, the market, was encouraging and your members are providing fiber pipes to data centers, cell towers, to offer all kinds of service.

Bundles and broadband prices have fallen from 87 cents per megabyte per second in 2015, to a mere 16 cents for a comparable service last year.

Yet, millions of Americans still lack any reliable access to broadband at a reliable speed, at a useful speed, I should say. We spent 65 billion in the Infrastructure Investment in Jobs Act, the IIJA, to support broadband activities. We have nothing to show for it.

We have a poster that shows how much money was put into a number of these different programs. Now, these aren't all of the programs. These is just some of the bigger ones. In fact, there are over 130 programs. Somebody made reference to that earlier.

And, you know, we have that much money sluicing around in the system, you wonder if there's a bit of a boondoggle gold rush going on here.

Most concerning is that the Biden administration allocated infrastructure, the IIJA, money, the largest appropriation to date, without any accounting for other broadband programs already existing. And this, I think, illustrates in some ways how complex the broadband ecosystem actually is, between the big IXPs, the rural co-ops, cable companies, et cetera.

Hard to serve areas still don't get the broadband on a priority basis, and the truth of the matter is that connecting underserved areas can be difficult and not economically viable.

So, you know, that's as true in Florida in my rural district as it is in Latin America, Asia, Africa, et cetera.

Satellite broadband is affordable. It can be deployed today and it can be, you know, offered at much lower price than try to drag a fiber to every single farm in my district. And, these are, you know, remote areas.

Another advantage is resilience. Satellites are not vulnerable to having, wayward Chinese ship drag an anchor across their fiber in the bottom of the ocean.

Ms. Morris? I understand the NTIA finally amended the implementation of the requirements to allow alternate technology of fiber for locations that are difficult to reach by fiber. I guess that's better late than ever.

I'm supportive of the chairman's bill, which I co-sponsor, that reforms the BEAD program while allowing full access for alternative technologies. It is, in a word, technology agnostic, and I'm okay with that. I think that's the way we should be.

Mr. Hale's comments, I think, underscored that the all technology eligible section in the Speed for BEAD bill allows an eligible entity to deploy reliable broadband service through any technology that meets the performance criteria.

Now, a question, Ms. Morris, is how did the Biden, NTIA, the Department of Commerce plan to ensure that areas that needed broadband, but, you know, obviously satellite was the obvious answer, you know, you can't drag a fiber everywhere, how in the last administration were you planning to address those people?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** I'm sorry, I couldn't hear the last part of the question.

**Rep. Neal Dunn (R-FL):** Well, the BEAD program by regulation, by edict, did not include anything other than fiber in the last administration, and there's places in the world think Pacific Island nations, it just makes sense.

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Sure. Congressman, thank you for the question.

The NTIA, within the BEAD program, did contemplate a wide variety of types of networks to be participants in the program. And, as you note, the alternative technology guidance that came out in early January of this year, further clarified the ways in which satellite companies in particular, along with other alternative technologies, could participate, and were expected to participate, in the program.

NTIA has historically seen that the primary goal is to push fiber as far as possible and economically feasible, but certainly to support other technologies that make sense in the areas where they make sense.

**Rep. Neal Dunn (R-FL):** So, my time has expired. We ought to be just technology agnostic. Tomorrow, some bright person's going to invent something we haven't thought of today.

With that Mr. Chairman, I yield back?

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** The gentleman yields.

The chair now recognizes Ms. Barragán from California for her five minutes.

**Rep. Nanette Barragán (D-CA):** Thank you Mr. Chairman, and I want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

It's a little challenging to sit in this hearing, and hear my Republican colleagues criticize something they didn't even support.

We're talking about delays. The BEAD program is even there as an option because of the infrastructure bill, because the first time this president was there, he promised an infrastructure bill and couldn't get it done, and how Democrats were able to get it done. And now, they have no problem, when there's an infrastructure project approved, going on their television set and trying to take credit for it.

And now, House Democrats have invested in broadband. Now, one of my colleagues across the aisle just said, we already have 15 programs, I don't know why we need another one. Like, why don't we just have one?

Ms. Morris, is there a benefit to the BEAD program? Why can't that money just be somewhere else? Or, would we only need one?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** So, it's right to acknowledge that there are a variety of funding programs, with a variety of purposes, that are funding high speed Internet investments throughout the country, all with different goals, some with specific rural goals, some with tribal goals, some with digital equity goals, and they are all working in concert together.

And, I will say that, in my time at NTIA, I saw some of the the closest and most integrated partnership across the federal agencies and departments that are tasked with this money, to make sure that the money was spent wisely and efficiently.

And, that programs like the BEAD program, which Congress recognized would take a long time to implement, could be the cleanup batter when it comes to finally connecting the last remaining locations that had not been served.

So, you know, in on some ways, we're at the mercy of the way Congress passed the laws, and the way that they're directed to different agencies and partnerships, but in other ways it creates a lot of opportunity for agencies and departments to work together to leverage these different sources of money, and to do what we've never been able to do, and have, at this moment, the opportunity to do, which is to finally close the digital divide once and for all.

**Rep. Nanette Barragán (D-CA):** And, is it my understanding that the state of Louisiana is on the doorstep of actually being able to get these dollars, and put it into effect.

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** More than on the doorstep. Their final proposal has already been approved. It is sitting with NIST. I don't know if there's employees to remove the special award condition that's holding it up, but that's the step that needs to be taken.

**Rep. Nanette Barragán (D-CA):** Yeah. So, it sounds to me like not only is this a program critically needed, but even states like Louisiana felt it's needed and is on the verge, or could be on the verge, were it not for this administration putting a hold and delaying of this program.

And, it's no surprise to me that Republicans want to weaken the protections around BEAD to funnel taxpayer money to Elon Musk. We've already seen this scheme play out with the FAA. You know, last week, Elon Musk falsely claimed on X that Verizon failed to meet the conditions of its \$2.4 million FAA contract to upgrade air traffic control systems. According to press reports, the FAA is now considering handing the contract over to Musk's Starlink. This move comes merely weeks after, Musk's DOGE accessed the FAA sensitive information and systems.

There's a word for this, it's corruption.

Ms. Morris, given Elon Musk influence over federal agencies that regulate his businesses, how can we ensure that BEAD funding is put toward actual broadband infrastructure as currently planned, rather than diverted to any one individual or company?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** So, there's a couple of ways in which I'll answer your question, Congresswoman.

I think it's critically important to look to the states that have been doing this work for the past three years, and ask them what they need, what they want to do, what they've planned to do, and to the extent that they are prepared to move forward to either the

next phase in the 14 step process, or to the finish line, or the end zone given an earlier metaphor, that we give them the tools to do it.

Second, I think Congress has an important role to play in making sure that the BEAD money which has been teed up to be spent very soon, is spent wisely and carefully, and doesn't fall into the same traps that we've seen time and a time again, over the years, in investments in broadband infrastructure in this space.

See, again, RDOF.

**Rep. Nanette Barragán (D-CA):** Thank you. I also understand that our chair's own home state of North Carolina is projected to create 6,100 jobs that would provide vital economic opportunities for middle class and working families, but these jobs are stuck in limbo, and, with today's announcement that there's going to be a review of the program, it's only going to cost further delays.

I don't understand why we don't have more champions trying to make sure this program continues and stays on schedule as is.

Thank you. I yield back.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you for yielding.

The chair now recognizes Representative Joyce for five minutes of questioning.

**Rep. John Joyce (R-PA):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thanks for our witnesses for testifying here today.

In Pennsylvania's 13th Congressional District, over 25,000 households lack connection to high speed Internet. Since joining this subcommittee, my priority has been clear. Connect each and every one of these households to affordable, reliable, high speed Internet.

Repeatedly, I've heard from providers and my colleagues about the critical role of the BEAD program.

I share that goal. Yet, despite the last administration's pumping over \$40 billion into the program, not one shovel has been put into the ground. Why is that? The regulatory red tape that the Biden administration has tied to the funding is the answer. Back home in Pennsylvania, the Biden administration's self-sabotage is on full display.

The Biden administration BEAD wage requirements have in fact tied the hands of the very agency tasked with implementing the BEAD program in the Commonwealth, by forcing applicants to pay workers at the highly skilled electric lineman rate of almost \$90



an hour, versus the traditional rate of \$60 an hour paid to telecommunications technicians.

If you are forcing program participants to pay a 50% premium in labor and overhead to even be eligible for the BEAD dollars, you've already, in effect, limited the universe of applicants, and eliminated smaller providers and contractors from the bidding process, smaller providers and contractors that often reach into rural America, where I represent.

Mr. Spellmyer, in your written testimony, you offer an example of an ACA Connects member who applied for BEAD funding, and reported that compliance with the program's requirements would carry a 70% increase in per mile deployment costs above those of a comparable project funded through the Department of Treasuries capital project funds.

So, we recognize that.

How can we say that the BEAD system is helping lower the cost of broadband deployment in rural America, when the government itself is adding so many additional expenses to the deployment process?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Congressman, thank you for your leadership on this issue. I think I would acknowledge that, to date, it hasn't helped because dollars haven't flowed.

Pennsylvania unfortunately is the poster child worst case of how the requirements have been layered on and adopted, proposed by the state and adopted by NTIA. The good news is, I do think we can, as I've said several times here, we can fix this. , I don't think it's a debate between do nothing, do everything, I think, or start over.

I think, a quick set of waivers...

**Rep. John Joyce (R-PA):** Do you feel we can fix this by passing Chairman Hudson's legislation? Is this a pathway to success?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** I do. We support the legislation.

**Rep. John Joyce (R-PA):** Thank you. I, as well.

Mr. Hale, what has been the immediate impact on providers who are looking to, or currently, operate in the state's BEAD programs that have prevailing wage?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** It just hurts the business case. Again, these are market failure areas. You're really needing to have a great business case to serve them. And prevailing wage hurts that.

And, I'm going to tell you, you know, wages jumped after COVID, and if this money starts rolling, there's not enough contractors and workforce out there, those wages are going to go up anyway, to be honest.

So, I think the prevailing wage is unnecessary.

**Rep. John Joyce (R-PA):** So, you're saying that the market should determine the wage?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** The market will. It'll push...

**Rep. John Joyce (R-PA):** Thank you. I agree with that.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Not enough there.

**Rep. John Joyce (R-PA):** Mr. Spellmeyer what reforms can we make to ensure that states are following and adopting any potential labor reforms to the point that we're discussing?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** That's a great question. And, to be honest, I haven't given it the level of thought that I wish I could have in advance.

NTIA controls the money. NTIA's got the money. They can make sure that the states follow however NtIA interprets it, and that would be a function of the current Commerce Department, to make sure that it does get followed.

And, if it doesn't, the money doesn't flow.

There would be other problems if the money didn't flow, but I think states will enforce the provisions.

**Rep. John Joyce (R-PA):** Thank you. I have one goal, and that is to connect those households in my Pennsylvania district to the Internet, and, if there is a common sense solution that can eliminate the hurdles that stand in the way of achieving that goal, then we owe it to our constituents and to the parents in my district, who take their kids to the Sheetz convenience store so they can log on to do their homework, because that's where there is Wi-Fi. We owe it to all of America to get shovels in the ground. We need to get America connected. We need to allow the farmers, the educators, and all of those involved to have the connectivity that they deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I yield back.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Thank you gentlemen for yielding. Now, the Chair recognizes Representative Carter from Louisiana.

**Rep. Troy A. Carter (D-LA):** Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and what a perfect segue to hear my colleagues see that we need to have shovels in the ground. Wow.

Louisiana is just a stones throw away from shovels in the ground. Louisiana is a perfect example, and demonstrative of this being a bipartisan issue and not one that is partisan.

The program started under the Biden administration, started implementation under the Democratic Governor John Bell Edwards, and has since been moving with warp speed under the Republican governor Jeff Landry.

And, I will quote. Jeff Landry said that the BEAD program is a generational investment that will create thousands of jobs, drives billions in e in economic growth, and transforms Louisiana communities and all 64 parishes.

Ready to have shovels in the ground.

However, since Trump administration took office just a week after Louisiana received its final approval, the Commerce Committee has withheld final funding approving that would otherwise put shovels in the ground, and we would be moving forward.

Yet, we find a way to take something that is clearly bipartisan and somehow want to make it partisan, take something that Louisiana has demonstrated our ability to work together, Republican and Democrat, to have a smooth transition to bring fiber to all parts of our state. This is one of those matters that we have such a clear example of how it's working. So, why do we want to stop it? It's moving. Why do we want to stop it?

A question for Ms. Morris. Ms. Morris, can you tell us about the time, detail and planning that goes into creating the state's BEAD deployment plan, and what happens if this administration starts pulling threads that make the fabric of these plans and awards, specifically for state like Louisiana, who's ready to go?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you, Congressman. As I've referenced, there is a very detailed process laid out in the statute that states must follow in order to get their full funding essentially unlocked and approved and ready to go. Each of those steps has different equities. Some of them are outside of the state, less inside the state's control, like the mapping process, which it took a year for the FCC's initial map to be released.

Others are a factor of, you know, the unique characteristics of the state.

States will draft their plans, they will submit them for approval. There's usually back and forth to try to help get to a workable place within the constructs of the statute for the BEAD implementation.

And. States have navigated all of that. They have spent hours upon hours, so,...

**Rep. Troy A. Carter (D-LA):** So, given that we've done all that, and we were literally ready to put shovels into the ground. Any delay that stops and starts over will likely cost more money, not less?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Will likely cost more money. And, if we're talking about something like reclassifying satellite or other services as reliable broadband, states could not only have to redo their entire bids, but it raises questions about whether or not locations are even available to be served under the...

**Rep. Troy A. Carter (D-LA):** So, we would actually go backwards. Thank you.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Mr. Hale, based on your experience managing small fiber based companies, what challenges do the Internet service providers and contractors that have received rewards in Louisiana to this moment, what would that do to them?

Well, I would just say, in general, we think there needs to be a recalibration, not a restructure, and that should happen quickly to move forward for providers, that recalibration.

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Is there a risk that we go backwards? there is risk that you go backwards, but you know, it may cost a little bit more, but the final result could be improved. So, that's the recalibration I'm talking about. But it should happen very quickly, especially in Louisiana.

**Rep. Troy A. Carter (D-LA):** Mr. Donovan, how would this affect your company's efforts to connect underserved communities, if BEAD funding was eliminated?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** I'm so sorry. If it was eliminated?

**Rep. Troy A. Carter (D-LA):** Yeah.

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** It would be removing a significant investment to connect everyone using fiber as...

And, I don't know how we got this far without giving credit to the Louisiana plan, of the credit of the Gumbo plan, which is a great name for it.

**Rep. Troy A. Carter (D-LA):** Thank you.

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** But using that, of using fiber, of using fixed wireless, of using satellite where it's necessary, but using all those tools.

**Rep. Troy A. Carter (D-LA):** And Louisiana is leading the way and very proud of that fact, and I'm very proud of the fact that every single one of our congressional districts, two Democrat and four Republicans, will benefit greatly, particularly in these rural areas. Everyone wins.

And, I will tell you, this program has been heralded by Republicans and Democrats in my state, and I urge us to not go backwards in making this partisan when in fact, it shouldn't be.

Mr. Chairman, I yield

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Gentlemen for yielding. Votes have been called.

But, we're going to go to Mr. Pfluger, and the chair recognized Mr. Pfluger for five minutes questioning, and then we will go to votes.

**Rep. August Pfluger (R-TX):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Donovan, I want to say thank you for your help and the support in last year's Congress on the Supporting National Security with Spectrum Act. Really appreciate what y'all were able to do.

I'll quickly go, and I know several of my colleagues have talked about this, but Mr.

Spellmyer, we're talking about, you know, for 1200 days, not a single dollar of the 42 plus billion has been spent on broadband deployment. And, you know, look at part of the reason for this delay, which was the Biden administration's efforts to force states to adopt union workforce agreements, climate change provisions, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and, in Texas, in the BEAD plan, the prevailing wage requirement, which would increase labor costs by 20 to 30% for rural Internet service providers, and prevent them from participating in the program.

So, my question is, if one of my constituents wanted to know if the NTIA required Texas to include prevailing wage requirements or climate assessments that could serve as barriers to deployment, where could they see that information? Or, how do they know?

It's a very specific question, but any...

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Well, I am not as fluent with the Texas negotiations that have gone on, and perhaps Ms. Morris can allude to that a little bit. But, I would think that would be inside the plan itself, as it sits out there today. A number of states have agreed to move forward on prevailing wage proposals, that we think have done nothing but delay and raise the cost.

**Rep. August Pfluger (R-TX):** And I think that's the expected reply, is that we just don't know. And, what a lot of these states are doing, and or not just state to state, but also just the plan is complex and there's a lack of accountability.

And, I want to highlight that I have a broadband bill, excuse me, a Broadband Build Out Accountability Act that would help us with these kinds of things, because that's a lot of money, 42 and a half billion dollars. And, to not have accountability for what is happening, besides just planning, but it's actually not building out, and not helping rural Texas.

It's unacceptable.

You know what, I'm going to yield at this point in time to... We said we'd split the time here for votes... to Mr. Fulcher.

**Rep. Russ Fulcher (R-ID):** Thank you, Congressman Pfluger. And, I'm going to deviate here, because of the conversation.

Permitting is clearly a huge, massive issue, and in my state we have a tremendous amount of federal lands, and so that even makes it more complex.

But, I've got a technology question that as far as I know hasn't been raised, and, frankly, I probably should probably know the answer to this, but if I don't, chances are some other people don't either, but I know we've got to have certain backbone requirements to handle bandwidth and all that type of stuff. I'll ask Mr. Donovan, technology wise, with all those struggles we have with permitting across terrestrial sites, where does wireless and satellite fit, and how far away is the technology where some of that can be infrastructural backbone?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Yeah. So, both. Both satellite and wire fixed wireless technologies have come a long way in recent years, and so that's where, especially with permitting, fixed wireless is a really important tool here, where if you can bring fiber to the tower, you can then serve the surrounding areas of that with a fixed wireless solution to provide that the speeds that are in many instances comparable, but you're able to get the speed, get those speeds, and get those service to your constituents much faster, and especially in states like yours where there's some challenging geographic terrain, there's some places that you're never going to string fiber, and that's where wireless is an important tool to be able to serve everyone.

**Rep. Russ Fulcher (R-ID):** Mr. Spellmyer? In the last minute, I know you've talked about this, but I'll just try to use this, and say your input, especially on permitting needs for federal land access.

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Yes, we have members that serve your state, and a number of similarly situated states. it's a huge issue.

I was talking this morning with a former member of this committee, Senator Curtis, about the impact in Utah, and the need to fix it there. Anything we can do to speed that along is huge.

As Mr. Donovan just alluded to, and I think he would agree, even on the wireless side, permitting reform is still needed there too.

We have got to fix this. There are a variety of technologies that can serve, but they all face, to one degree or another, permitting challenges that have to be addressed, as I talked about shot clocks before.

**Rep. Russ Fulcher (R-ID):** Well, speaking of shot clocks, mine is up.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** I thank the gentleman for yielding, and my apologies to our panel. We have to go to votes. I remind the members that we have been reminded, we got 20 minutes, so we have got to get down there, and we will reconvene maximum 15 minutes after the last vote. But if you can get back here quickly, we'll get started.

Thank you, recess.

## **RECESS**

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** The chair now recognizes Ms. Cammack of Florida for five minutes for questions.

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, for holding this important hearing today, and thank you very much to our witnesses for hanging in there with us. It's always a fun experience when votes get called in the middle of a hearing and I, I'm sure you appreciated the reprieve. Mr. Spellmyer, I can see you were very appreciative of the break.

So, as my colleagues have stated today, we are all collectively very concerned about the broadband, really, the spectrum of the broadband programs that are spread across the federal government now, according to GAO, over 130 programs at 15 different agencies.

Now, I know that many of them have different standards, and eligibility criteria too, and at the very least, we can make sure that they have the same requirements. Now, I tried to do this for the USDA ReConnect program, last Congress, with my Rural Internet Improvement Act.

Mr. Spellmeyer, Mr. Hale, how should Congress try to standardize requirements for the different broadband programs across the various agencies?

I would love to hear your feedback on this, and I'll start with you, Mr. Spellmeyer.

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Thank you, Congresswoman. Certainly the GAO report that you just referenced was quite eye-opening, even to those of us in the industry who are familiar with the programs, to see them all detailed.

There is a need for standardization and streamlining. I think part of my answer to that would be, conduct a review. Do it through regular order here in the committee, figure out what the programs are. Congress has a habit of, you know, throwing one program on over here, and then somebody else throws it over there, and pretty soon you've got 113 programs.

I think it would be useful to streamline and combine some of those. Some of them are no longer, I think, completely relevant.

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** Right. So consolidation.

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** My message earlier was, let's streamline the BEAD program and get back to work, putting fiber in the ground, and using the other technologies that are out there.

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** Excellent. Thank you.

Mr. Hale?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Yeah, I would agree that they should be streamlined. It would be helpful to have a common definition, a well thought out definition, of what broadband needs are, currently, as well into the future. We talked about the programs a little bit earlier.

And, you know, just to clarify, the USF is not appropriated, that is the essential program to make sure that networks are built, sustained, and remain affordable, and then, of course, the BEAD programs, the grant programs come along for a greater capital infusion when you still got market failure areas where USF doesn't work. So, a combination.



The USF program would be the best place to establish those guidelines, those standards.

And, you know, if USDA has some projects which have been very helpful in closing the digital divide, if they could be the same standards, that would be perfect.

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** Thank you.

And Mr. Donovan, what about wireless?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Well, I think it's important to recognize, with those different programs, that there is an inherent difference in fixed connectivity and mobile, and Americans want to have access at home, but also on their devices, as you're not connected to a fixed connection, and so, making sure that you don't lump those different programs together. You need both of them, to have those two different uses and purposes.

And, as my colleague mentioned, of looking at also the difference of what is a deployment program, versus what is a program to sustain that deployment.

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** Okay. '

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Because, ultimately, there's no future proof technology of any kind. If there isn't sustained involvement, sustained investment, to keep it going.

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** Okay. Perfect.

Mr. Spellmyer, NTIA added some pretty onerous labor requirements to BEAD. Now, do you think that these requirements make it easier or harder to find skilled workers needed to build these broadband networks?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Well, there is no doubt in my mind that they make it significantly more difficult to find skilled workers.

And, I should have added in response to your first question, I think the other thing you have to sort out is what agency's going to administer what program. That's a real challenge.

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** Well, and kind of going back to what you said, Mr. Donovan, would you agree that the requirements that we're trying to create some uniformity for across the broadband program should apply, and have some, maybe synchronicity isn't the right word, but there should be some sort of mirror in the wireless realm?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Yes, and it should be based on what consumers are actually expecting to receive.

It's a big problem we have in the current 5G fund at the FCC, is that there's an artificially low speed threshold that means that you're not going to...

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** You don't say. It's like dial-up speed.

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** We could use your help fixing that before the program moves forward.

**Rep. Kat Cammack (R-FL):** Well, on behalf of basically every American in the United States, we will do everything possible to increase the upload, download speeds that are so desperately needed to be updated.

So, thank you all so much for your time. My time has expired. I yield

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** The chair now recognizes Mr. Menendez from New Jersey for five minutes for questions.

**Rep. Rob Menendez (D-NJ):** Thank you, Chairman.

Access to reliable high speed Internet is as integral to educational and job success. As access to textbooks or transportations, connectivity allows students to learn, entrepreneurs to run small businesses, workers to access training and job opportunities and for families to connect.

But, republicans left working families in the lurch last year, after they refused to extend the Affordable Connectivity Program, a lifeline that connected people across the country with Internet services, including 338,000 families in New Jersey. Thankfully, the FCC stepped up after the ACP lapsed to modernize the schools and libraries programs of the Universal Service Fund, also known as E-Rate, to help our constituents get connected at home through hotspot lending.

This service is transformative. Learning isn't one size fits all, and students need access to digital tools outside of traditional working hours at schools and libraries. Extending access to broadband at home can change and has changed lives. And, as classes and skill building increasingly rely on virtual classrooms and digital textbooks, students and teachers need to be connected at home to keep from falling behind without broadband at home. Completing homework is nearly impossible, forcing students to fast food restaurants or library parking lots after hours, just to get a Wi-Fi signal.

Thankfully, with hotspots, it doesn't have to be this way anymore. In my district right now, schools and libraries like the Gutenberg School District and Elizabeth Public

Library System are taking advantage of this new service provided through the E-Rate program, by applying for hotspots and service to help families in New Jersey's 8th Congressional District, and 1200 schools and libraries across the country are currently applying for close to 1 million hotspots.

That's 1 million families that could have access to a brighter future because of this innovative modernization of the E-Rate program.

Unfortunately, like some of the other groundbreaking broadband programs we've discussed today, this program is under threat by Republicans who have introduced CRAs in both chambers to repeal this FCC action, and prevent libraries and schools from getting access to these hotspots.

And, I appreciate earlier my colleague Mr. Joyce referring to students in his district having to use parking lots to access Wi-Fi. I would hate to think, and I do hate to think, of the kids in his district sitting at Sheetz in the evenings to do homework, as I wouldn't want that for my constituents, or any of my colleagues' constituents.

Luckily we've seen those cases plummet because of the FCC's hotspot lending program.

So, I hope he, and all of my colleagues, will join me in fighting against efforts to pass a CRA that would undo that progress. It's difficult to imagine why they would want to set our students back to the days of sitting for hours in parking lots, just to keep up in school, but that is exactly what they are trying to do.

This would make their own constituents worse off.

Ms. Morris, you've spoken extensively about how our broadband programs are designed to work together to address aspects of the digital divide. Can you explain how the FCC's modernization of the E-Rate program helps keep families connected at home?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you, Congressman.

Yeah, this seems to me to be a no brainer. Particularly, you know, while we're waiting to see BEAD through the finish line, when hopefully all of the homes in your district will be connected to an affordable high capacity connection.

Hotspots are an incredibly useful tool to provide connectivity for students, and I would hope that that it remains a program that could be viable for some time.

I would also note that the CRA is a pretty blunt tool, and has a preclusive effect from agencies implementing a similar rule down the road, and, you know, in this case, I think the preclusive effect of getting kids help with their homework connectivity is a particularly sharp one.

**Rep. Rob Menendez (D-NJ):** Yeah, I agree. And, especially with the learning loss that people are already challenged with after COVID, we shouldn't make it a, an additional burden to access the educational opportunities that exist, but are only accessible through a hotspot, so agree with you there.

If Congressional Republicans successfully end this FCC program to support hotspot lending, what would be the impact on students and library patrons in districts like mine?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Well, it would just make it much harder for students to do their homework. It would put the burden on libraries to carry, excuse me, that water, and would likely have a dramatic effect on the success of these students in their schools.

**Rep. Rob Menendez (D-NJ):** I'll give you a second on that. And I appreciate your answer.

And speaking of water, please have a sip. Take care.

Hotspot lending should not be partisan. We can all agree that kids shouldn't be forced to sit in the fast food parking lots late at night to be able to do their homework. In fact, schools and libraries from 46 states have submitted hotspot applications.

So, this is applicable across the country in red and blue districts to help families across the country. I urge my colleagues on the other side of the aisle to recognize the tremendous benefits of this program and to abandon any efforts to destroy it.

Thank you. With that, I yield back.

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** Thank you Mr. Menendez. I now recognize myself for five minutes for the purpose of questions. Thank you to the witnesses.

Back in the Indiana State Senate, I worked on broadband legislation trying to get access to unserved areas. As noted in some of your testimonies, we have seen overbuilding and technologies that are picking winners and losers in some of these funding opportunities, and one of the things that I wanted to do is make sure that any broadband that was deployed went to areas that had zero access first, and then we would build toward higher speeds.

I happened to serve in the Indiana State Senate in one of the most unserved areas of the state of Indiana for access to broadband, leaving my part of the state at an extreme disadvantage when it comes to economic opportunities, precision agriculture, telehealth, and also education, small businesses, you name it, we were at a disadvantage. I was once speaking to a high school group, and I asked this high school in my district if they knew where the most unserved area of the state was for broadband access, and a student raised his hand and said, my backyard. And, it was just that.

In fact, when BEAD, when the Notice of Funding Opportunity came out, I sent a letter to both NTIA and our Governor, in September of 2023, sharing my concerns with the funding opportunity. And, a particular concern were the mandates that I thought could delay and complicate deployment of funds, which I understand we have seen.

So, I would ask Mr. Spellmyer, after BEAD passed three years ago, how much broadband funding has been distributed to date

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Under the BEAD program?

My understanding is that answer is zero.

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** Zero.

Mr. Donovan, how much BEAD funding has been, or how much broadband funding has been distributed to date?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** So it's been distributed to the states is my understanding, but has not yet gone to providers to provide service.

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** So, the very thing that many of you raised concerns about, and that I raise concerns about, seems to be, at least, a part of the problem.

Another concern of mine was the Notice of Funding Opportunities general prohibition on fiber projects. It's explicitly in conflict with Congress's intent for the funding to be technology-neutral, and it would likely impact deployment. State flexibility and prioritization consistent with the law should be protected, and it included flexibility with the workforce necessary to execute the projects, which the funding opportunity did not provide.

Making sure that Internet access is available to unserved communities first, remains a top priority of mine as we work to try to figure out some of these issues, including the great number of different broadband programs we have throughout the federal government. And, streamlining that so we can make sure that broadband resources are utilized to get to these unserved areas, and make sure that citizens in the unserved areas not only are connected, but are connected at the highest speeds possible to compete globally in the economy.

So, I appreciate your written testimony. I do have a couple of questions, with the remaining time.

Coverage for our broadband maps seems to be a real issue, particularly for precision agriculture and agriculture land. Our mobile coverage is lacking. Do you think it's

possible we can improve the coverage maps to better show what areas are agricultural, and what's necessary to build it out?

And I will put that question to Mr. Donovan.

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** We have to, right? If we move forward these programs with maps that show that there's overstated coverage, especially over agricultural ranch lands, then you're going to continue to being unserved and unavailable to use the latest technologies.

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** So, Mr. Donovan, I want to talk about the 5G Fund. I understand the CCA has concerns with how the Biden FCC structured the program. You outlined some of that in your testimony. You say the way the program is structured could unintentionally lead to mobile connectivity in rural areas that would be worse than what is currently available.

What do you mean by that?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** So, as it's currently structured, there's some places that have service today because of USF support, where USF has been invested to it. But, if the speed thresholds for what can qualify for the program are artificially set, then places that only have service today because of USF will be ineligible for the 5G fund.

So, you'll put plow all the money into some super expensive sites in the most remote areas where, you know, maybe satellite is the best way to serve it. Meanwhile, the places that rely on USF to stay online today are going to go dark. This'll lead to, you know, rusty towers and less service.

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** Yeah. Thank you.

In the remaining time I have, Mr. Spellmeyer, is it your impression that the labor requirements in BEAD have impacted deployment?

**Grant Spellmeyer - ACA Connects:** Unquestionably.

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** Thank you. I'd like to submit for the record both letters that I sent, not only to our Governor, but also to the NTIA. Submit those letters to the record without objection.

Thank you.

I'll now recognize Ms. McClellan of Virginia for five minutes for the purpose of questions.

**Rep. Jennifer McClellan (D-VA):** Thank you, madam Chair.

The good news here is there are a lot of areas where there is universal agreement. We agree that universal broadband is as necessary today as universal electrification was in the beginning in the thirties, and universal service for the old landline telephone was.

Broadband has basically replaced our landline telephones, but it also ensures that we can have the most up-to-date and highest technology in a wide variety of places. We agree that every community should have access to affordable, reliable, high-speed Internet services that can adapt to ever increasing demand, and that we don't want our rural and low income communities to get the short end of the stick for reliability and affordability.

But, building a broadband network is complicated. It's more complicated, I would argue, than building highways and bridges and roads because the broadband network can become obsolete that much more quickly.

So, let's talk about the reason for the BEAD delays. We hear from our Republican colleagues that they're worried about waste, and we agree, and so we wanted to make sure that federal funding through the BEAD program was used to build out unserved areas.

I've heard that a couple of times. It's not permitting delays that have caused the delay up to now, because you don't get a permit until you know where you're putting your equipment, and you don't know where you're putting your equipment until you know who's unserved. So, that was why the act said, FCC, build a map, that will be the starting point for how money is allocated to who and where. But, the FCC doesn't know who is served, they don't know where the networks are, and they don't know what's in the pipeline to be built. So, they needed to get that information from the broadband providers.

That's a complicated process, I don't have time to go into, but let's just say that took a long time. It took a year.

Then, because we want to make sure we're not going to overbuild and waste money, there was a challenge process led by the states that took six months. Because we, as we did with the telecommunications infrastructure, we left to the states the primary responsibility of figuring out how to allocate this money that's appropriate.

States were all over the map. Some states, like Virginia, had broadband offices, had programs that were already giving out grants to build networks. Other states had to start from scratch. States are public entities, and, when they take public actions, they have to follow open record laws, open meeting laws so that they can get input from the

public, so that the public can be sure what the requirements are going to be in whatever plan they ultimately adopt.

That takes time, public notice, et cetera. That was a six month process just to do the challenge process.

But, at the same time, before they could get to the challenge process, they've have got to build up the broadband capacity, bring the stakeholders together, et cetera, et cetera. So, that's what has happened in the first year and a half.

Once you get the map, then you build your plan. Once you know who needs the broadband, then you build the plan for how to get it there. That's what's been happening in the rest of the time, not permitting, because there's nothing to get a permit for yet.

Now there's been a lot of discussion about should this be technology neutral? The act says that, whatever federal dollars are spent on needs to be scalable and reliable. Scalable means it needs to meet demand. What we're talking about are the upload speeds and download speeds, of everything from healthcare infrastructure or information, to the infrastructure for a manufacturing plant, to my son playing video games on his phone, all happening at the same time. So, you need to make sure you have a network that's reliable and sustainable no matter what the weather. Fiber, in most cases, meets that need more than in other cases.

And so, what the act does is say whatever the technology is, we want you to choose the one that's the most reliable. That may be one thing today, but build a plan that's future proof.

So we can build a network that's future proof, so that when we spend federal money, we don't waste it on something that is obsolete tomorrow.

Now I don't have a question. I just wanted to make sure that we all understand the starting point of what we are and are not talking about, when we decide what changes need to be made to BEAD, and what the long-term implications will be.

And I yield back.

**Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN):** The gentleman from South Carolina, Mr. Fry is recognized for five minutes for questions.

**Rep. Russell Fry (R-SC):** Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to all our witnesses for being here. I actually have really enjoyed the testimony. I know we've been bouncing around and we were on the floor, but it's been really good as a new member of the committee to hear it.



Broadband is critical. It's absolutely essential to our students, our healthcare providers, our rural communities. We've got some folks that are here with me, constituents of mine from some of those rural communities.

Yet, you know, and the criticism from us, and I think broadly at least some on the other side, is that under the previous administration, mismanagement and regulations have really slowed that expansion, leaving many Americans, particularly in underserved and rural communities without that necessary access.

In South Carolina's 7th Congressional District, where I represent, a telephone cooperative, HTC, is bridging that digital divide. If you look at a map, they've basically, you could tell where the county lines are, because they have installed so much fiber and connected so many people, tens of thousands across the county, and expanding into others. They've made major investments in high-speed Internet.

But, without these streamlined policies, their ability to provide that reliable, affordable broadband, I think, is at risk. And, they're not the only ones. Right?

We must fix those programs, preserve the Universal Service Fund, cut some of this red tape, and improve the grant programs as discussed, like BEAD, and so, I look forward to hearing how we can modernize that.

And we've heard a lot of that testimony today, but Mr. Hale, what role do you think the USF plays in ensuring broadband access generally, to people along the Grand Strand, or in rural communities in South Carolina?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Yeah, I mean, as I stated before, USF is the essential program.

It's not necessarily designed to bridge the digital divide completely with capital projects, but it does provide that in South Carolina, it does provide that in every state. And, if you want it to last long term and be there 10 years from now, be sustainable, and promote affordability, it is the program that you have to do, again.

Now, you have to have interjection of these other programs, at the same time, to do that capital for these market failure areas, where USF is not providing that, that's, you know, where BEAD comes in.

But, it's critical. It's going to be critical for a long time. These networks aren't going to last forever. You're going to have to rebuild them again at some point, you know, so you've have got to have a strong USF program.

**Rep. Russell Fry (R-SC):** Thank you for that.

Mr. Donovan, can you discuss the importance of ongoing USF support in maintaining initial investments in those broadband networks?

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** Absolutely, and I love holding up HTC as a success story for how this program can work.

As I've said before, there's no such thing as a future-proof technology. If you can't continue to preserve and invest, maintain it, that's just part of operating a network, and that's why it's so critical to have the backstop of USF for preservation of service, as well as the expanding broadband connectivity.

And, that's why we are so concerned that, if the Supreme Court does something to jeopardize USF, I'd strongly encourage you to be ready for Congress to step in, and to maintain it.

**Rep. Russell Fry (R-SC):** Speaking of..

I mean, that was honestly where I was going to go next. I was going to go to Mr. Hale, but we're going to continue right with you, sir. I think you just got in the hot seat in a good way.

You know, given that uncertainty, what should Congress do now to prep for maybe the inevitable? Or maybe just general things that we can do to fix it? With the funding gaps, the loan defaults, broadband price hikes for consumers, resulting from Supreme Court actions.

**Tim Donovan - Competitive Carriers Association:** So, CCA is part of this at the Supreme Court, because we do think that what Congress did in the '96 Act is constitutional, and that we were successful, but we're defending it because of the grave situation if this court goes the other way. So, congress can affirm, again, the constitutionality of the Universal Service Fund.

The challenge, while the court case is pending, is that if you don't know how the court could say that it's unconstitutional. It doesn't really give you the roadmap for what Congress needs to do to fix it. Again, because we think that it's already pretty clear that it is constitutional.

**Rep. Russell Fry (R-SC):** Thank you for that.

Mr. Hale? Also kind of in that same vein, do you believe that Congress should consider...

I know that there's a proposal to address the private delegation issue before the court, of , the Universal Service administrative company. Do you believe Congress should consider that option? In preparation of?

**Greg Hale - LTC Connect:** Congress should be prepared. Yes. I think there's, you know, a plan B.

We still think USF is constitutional. We are hopeful that the Supreme Court will rule that way. But yes, Congress should be prepared to step in, because we've talked about today the devastating impact if USF went away, and it would be immediate.

So, they definitely need to be ready for, and I know this committee and staff and leadership have had discussions about that for a long time long with the Senate Commerce Committee.

**Rep. Russell Fry (R-SC):** Thank you so much.

With that, I see my time has expired, Madam Chair, and I yield back. Mr. Chair.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** I thank the gentleman..

**Rep. Russell Fry (R-SC):** I wasn't assuming your gender, okay.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** Well, it's whatever you think you are these days, right?

Anyway, enough of that, the chair recognizes Mr. Tonko for five minutes for questioning.

**Rep. Paul Tonko (D-NY):** Thank you Mr. Chair and Ranking Member Matsui for hosting this hearing, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Expanding broadband access has long been a priority of mine, because high-speed Internet is no longer optional, it's essential. That's why the bipartisan infrastructure law's \$42 billion dollar investment in the BEAD program is an historic victory for the American people, aimed at ensuring every American has access to affordable and high speed Internet.

But, instead of seizing this opportunity, House republicans. Have sought to undermine it, sowing doubt, weakening program standards, and putting corporate interests ahead of hardworking Americans.

Despite these challenges, states are making headway. New York is one of 22 states that has completed the challenge process, and is moving forward with provider selection and finalizing its BEAD proposals.

That's real meaningful progress, but we can't afford to slow down. Every day of delay means families and students and small businesses in underserved communities remain

disconnected. Yet, instead of ensuring shovels hit the ground, Republicans and the Trump administration are trying to rewrite standards not to help our communities, but to benefit billionaires.

And, this is unacceptable.

Let's be clear. Affordability is non-negotiable. Broadband isn't truly accessible if people can't afford it. So, when the Affordable Connectivity Program expired, last Congress, over 3000 of my constituents reached out, worried, frustrated, and rightly demanding action.

But, Republicans refused to extend it.

So, Ms. Morris, first thank you for your outstanding work as the former deputy administrator at NTIA. Given your experience at NTIA working on the BEAD program, how would weakening or removing affordability provisions impact broadband access for both rural and low income Americans?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Thank you, Congressman.

Well, I would just note that, in the statute, affordability is a bedrock principle, it's mentioned three times in the first section alone. And, there is a requirement in the statute that states adopt a low cost, ensure that there is a low cost option available, in concert with NTIA, and with approval from the Assistant Secretary, which all states have done.

The reason that it is so foundational in the statute is because, when we are investing billions of dollars, as you note, into these networks, we want to ensure that they're actually reaching the households that need the connectivity most. If we are building networks that people on the ends cannot afford, we are building bridges to nowhere, networks to no one, and these households will not be able to, and these communities will not be able to, reap the full benefits of the connectivity.

**Rep. Paul Tonko (D-NY):** Well, thank you.

And, as you indicate, making certain that we ensure funds reach the communities that need them the most, that requires strong federal coordination. That's why, in 2020, I fought to establish the Office of Internet Connectivity and Growth, through my Access Broadband Act, to improve coordination and ensure funding is deployed efficiently and equitably.

So, Ms. Morris, given the complexity of BEAD's mission, how does coordination through OICG help ensure these funds reach the right communities?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** Well, so within the department, and within NTIA, ample coordination is happening, but I think the real success story of coordination is the coordination that this influx of funding has driven across the federal government writ large.

In my time at NTIA, I saw an impressive amount of day to day... I mean, we were on the phone with other agencies, other departments, day in day out, to make sure that our grant programs were coordinated in a way to maximize the federal investment, and take that money as far as it can, and truly the Office of Internet Connectivity and Growth was at the epicenter of that, and there are incredible people working in that office doing great work, day in and day out.

**Rep. Paul Tonko (D-NY):** And, another key pillar of the BEAD program is investing in a workforce that reflects the communities it serves, ensuring good jobs, strong labor protections, and inclusive hiring practices. We cannot let these critical provisions be stripped away.

So how would removing these provisions impact equitable workforce development in broadband expansion?

**Sarah Morris - ex-NTIA:** I think the untold story with BEAD is that it's one of the best workforce development programs that we've seen, and these investments in infrastructure will drive a workforce to build them that is unprecedented in scale and scope.

The provisions in NTIA's NOFO for BEAD, related to workforce, were designed to ensure that the workforce building these networks was skilled, safe, and well compensated.

**Rep. Paul Tonko (D-NY):** Well, at the end of the day, this is about ensuring that all Americans, rural, urban, or suburban have the broadband access they need to thrive, and we cannot let political games or corporate greed derail this mission. The stakes are too high, and the time for action certainly is now.

With that Mr. Chair, I yield back.

**Rep. Richard Hudson (R-NC):** I thank the gentleman for yielding, seeing there are no further members wishing to be recognized. I would like to thank our witnesses for being here today.

Thank you so much. This has been an important hearing and I think we kind of understand how we got to move forward.

I ask for unanimous consent to insert in the record the documents included on the staff hearing documents list, and, without objection, that will be the order. And we are adjourned.

Oh, sorry. Page two. Sorry. This is my first time doing this. I remind members that they have 10 business days to submit questions for the record, and I ask the witnesses to respond to questions promptly. Members should submit their questions by the close of business on Wednesday, March 19th.

Without objection. This subcommittee is now adjourned.