

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 8, 2024

The Honorable Martin Heinrich  
Chair

Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,  
Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies Washington,  
D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Hoeven  
Ranking Member

Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Heinrich and Ranking Member Hoeven,

We write to ask for your support of the rural broadband loan and grant program authorized by the *Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018* as you develop the fiscal year (FY) 2025 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill. Specifically, we request that you include the fully authorized annual funding amount of \$350 million to continue implementing this program.

Affordable, high-speed internet access is critical for the economic development and quality of life of the nation's rural communities. Nationally, more than 17.3 percent<sup>1</sup> of Americans in rural areas lack access to fixed terrestrial broadband at speeds of 25 Mbps/3 Mbps, compared to only 2 percent of Americans in urban areas. Without access to high-quality, affordable internet service, workers have fewer opportunities for good-paying jobs, farmers and business owners are isolated from new markets, children are limited in their education opportunities, and health care providers do not have reliable access to the most advanced technology to help patients.

With broad stakeholder support as well as bipartisan, bicameral agreement in Congress, the *Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018*, better known as the 2018 Farm Bill, expanded the existing U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Utilities Service's (RUS) Broadband Program to include a new grant component to be offered along with the already provided loan and loan guarantee financing. Too often, loan financing does not offer enough incentive or support for service providers to invest in rural communities that have the greatest need. In FY2022, FY2023, and FY2024, Congress appropriated \$486.6 million, \$363.5 million, and \$100.4 million, respectively, for the USDA's ReConnect Pilot Program, which also offered grant funding and loans for rural broadband projects. Additionally, through the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*, Congress authorized an additional \$1.9 billion over ten years for the ReConnect program, totaling to an additional \$2 billion investment into USDA programs for expanding broadband in rural areas. By combining grants with loans, as well as making additional improvements to the USDA RUS Rural Broadband Program like raising speed standards, the 2018 Farm Bill builds on this pilot, enhancing the economic feasibility of projects that provide high-speed, high-quality internet to rural America.

<sup>1</sup> Federal Communications Commission, 2021 Broadband Deployment Report, January 19, 2021, p. 20, available at <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-21-18A1.pdf>.

Every American, regardless of where they live, work, or retire must have access to the technology necessary to succeed in the 21st century. To achieve this, we urge the committee to fully fund the annual authorized amount of \$350 million for USDA's Rural Broadband Access Grant, Loan and Loan Guarantee Program. After expeditious implementation of the Farm Bill Program, we would also request the transfer of any unused funding from the current ReConnect Pilot into this program.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



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Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator



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Roger Marshall, M.D.  
United States Senator



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Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator



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Jon Ossoff  
United States Senator