

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 3, 2022

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin
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 Baldwin 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) 2023 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 percent¹ 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 FY2020, FY2021, and FY2022, Congress appropriated \$555 million, \$635 million, and \$486.6 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.

¹ 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.

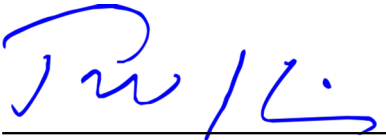
Sincerely,



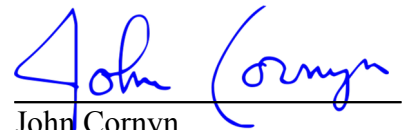
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



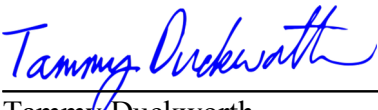
Roger Marshall, M.D.
United States Senator



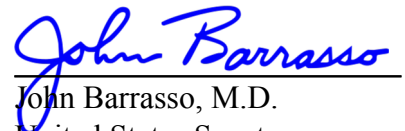
Tim Kaine
United States Senator



John Cornyn
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



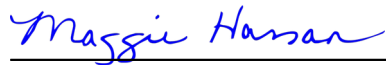
John Barrasso, M.D.
United States Senator



Raphael G. Warnock
United States Senator




Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



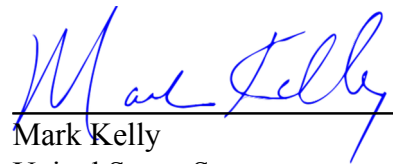
Tina Smith
United States Senator



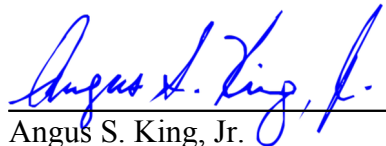
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



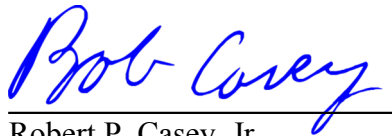
Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



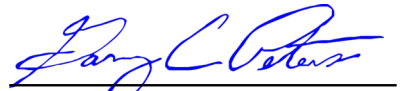
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Gary C. Peters
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator