

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515

December 04, 2020

Chairman John Hoeven  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Room S-128, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Jeff Merkley  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Room S-128, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chairman Sanford Bishop  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
House Committee on Appropriations  
2362-A Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Ranking Member Jeff Fortenberry  
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural  
Development, Food and Drug  
Administration, and Related Agencies  
House Committee on Appropriations  
2362-A Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Hoeven, Ranking Member Merkley, Chairman Bishop, and Ranking Member Fortenberry,

As the House and Senate negotiate the final Fiscal Year 2021 funding bill, we urge you to provide increased funding from the enacted FY2020 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Bill, for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s ReConnect Program.

Affordable and reliable last-mile broadband access is critical for rural communities' economic development, enabling them to fully participate in the internet-based economy. It enables farmers to use precision agriculture techniques, patients to access medical care remotely via telemedicine, children to conduct research for school projects, and businesses to engage with customers. Yet, according to the FCC's 2020 Broadband Deployment Report, 22% of Americans in rural areas lack access to fixed terrestrial broadband at speeds of 25 Mbps download/3 Mbps upload, compared to only 1.5% of Americans in urban areas.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has shone a bright spotlight on the disparities that exist across the country between those who have broadband and those who do not. These disparities have real public health and economic impacts – and not just during a public health crisis. In the midst of this crisis, millions of Americans find themselves without the ability to access a wide range of important services, including e-learning for children being schooled at home, video conferencing to work from home and stay in touch with our loved ones, and telehealth services that help flatten the curve by keeping those feeling ill at home.

The ReConnect rural broadband program was launched in December 2018 by USDA. Congress appropriated \$600 million to the program in FY2018, \$550 million in FY2019, and \$555 million in

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515

FY2020. To date, USDA has invested over \$1.3 billion in high-speed broadband infrastructure, which will create or improve rural e-Connectivity for rural customers across 34 states. In both the first and second application cycles, USDA has reported an approximately three to one ratio in funding sought to funding available.

We believe the strong demand for this program and the historic challenges facing those without internet as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to demonstrate a need for significantly higher funding for the program. Cutting funding to this program, as the Senate bill would do, would not only be a failure to meet the demands already placed on the ReConnect program but would also be a failure to meet the needs of millions of Americans living in rural communities at a time when the challenges facing those without broadband have already been significantly exacerbated.

Economic mobility and access to the modern economy of Americans should not be determined by their zip code. Access to reliable high-speed internet is fundamentally an issue of opportunity and equity. A lack of broadband access in the 21st Century must not be thought of as any different than those communities that lacked access to electricity in the middle of the last century. It is imperative that we meet the challenges of universal broadband access this century with the same urgency and determination with which we met the electrification challenges last century.

Including additional funding for the ReConnect Program, as was done in the House-passed FY2021 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Bill, will provide a meaningful down-payment in our rural communities and their economy at a time when it's most needed. We respectfully request that you continue to invest in rural communities by increasing funding for the ReConnect Program relative to the FY20 enacted level.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Abigail D. Spanberger  
Member of Congress

/s/ Chris Jacobs  
Member of Congress

/s/ Chris Pappas  
Member of Congress

/s/ Chrissy Houlahan  
Member of Congress

/s/ Anna G. Eshoo  
Member of Congress

/s/ Jeff Van Drew  
Member of Congress

/s/ Vicky Hartzler  
Member of Congress

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
Washington, DC 20515

/s/ Peter A. DeFazio  
Member of Congress

/s/ Elise M. Stefanik  
Member of Congress

/s/ John Katko  
Member of Congress

/s/ Filemon Vela  
Member of Congress

/s/ Terri A. Sewell  
Member of Congress

/s/ Roger Marshall, M.D.  
Member of Congress

/s/ Pete Stauber  
Member of Congress

/s/ Ro Khanna  
Member of Congress