

# New broadband map has flaws

February 24 2011, By Troy Wolverton

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The federal government last week finally released a national map of broadband services, but it leaves a lot to be desired.

It's helpful to be able to see on a map which areas of the country and your area can get high-speed cable Internet access. It's also neat to be able to type in your address or ZIP code and see which companies offer [wireless Internet access](#) there.

But it's frustrating to see that after two years of work, some of the information is incomplete, incorrect or out of date. There's much you might like to know that the map and its accompanying database don't provide, most notably how much [broadband services](#) cost in your area.

Consumer groups and advocates have been clamoring for years for [broadband providers](#) or the government to produce a national map showing where high-speed Internet access is and isn't available. Although broadband service has been commercially available for more than a decade, providers had generally kept that data close to the vest. Consumers have for years now been able to see maps of wireless coverage offered by cell phone providers, but haven't been able to do the same with broadband access.

But the stimulus plan pushed through by the Obama administration allotted money to collect data on broadband access and to produce the map. Dubbed the National Broadband Map, it was produced by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, which is a branch of the Department of Commerce, in conjunction with the

## [Federal Communications Commission.](#)

Thanks to the map and website, you can quickly see where to find broadband providers offering download speeds of 100-megabits per second or greater. You can also see where Comcast offers service around the country, for instance, or which areas have three or more wired broadband providers.

The database offers other interesting nuggets. For example, according to a report put together by the NTIA from the data on the site, only about 55 percent of those who live in the rural areas of California have access to broadband services offering speeds of at least 3 megabits per second. In urban areas, 94 percent have access to [broadband services](#) with that speed or better.

But some of the data is simply wrong or incomplete. At my house, in addition to Comcast, I could get high-speed access via AT&T's U-verse service, which offers download speeds of up to 24 megabits per second. While the map site lists AT&T as a broadband provider in my area, it doesn't list the company among those that offer broadband speeds of greater than 3 megabits per second.

Further, even though the map was just launched, it's already out of date. Late last year, Clearwire began offering fixed wireless broadband service in the San Francisco Bay Area. But if you ask the site to show you on the map where you can get fixed wireless access, you won't find any locations in the Bay Area.

Those aren't the only problems. At least on the day it launched, the map was slow to load. The map didn't provide an easy way to zoom in on a particular region and see different data highlighted. And it isn't really interactive.

For example, it will show you visually where you can find service providers who offer access of 50 megabits or greater. But you can't click on those areas to see who the provider is or what precise areas they serve.

Also, you won't find information on pricing. The Federal Communications Commission has said that one of the biggest factors hindering broadband adoption is price, yet no pricing information is provided on the site.

On a conference call with journalists, government officials said they felt that including pricing information would be misleading. Prices change frequently, especially with promotional offers, and the NTIA plans to update the map only twice a year.

But non-promotional prices of broadband service don't change all that often, so providing and updating that kind of information shouldn't be that big a deal. The fact that the pricing data might soon be out of date is an argument for updating the map and its database more often, not for providing less information.

The map just launched, so it is likely to get better over time. The government is allowing anyone to download and use the database and is providing tools to allow other websites to access the map and data. It also is taking input from consumers to identify errors that will be corrected in updates.

Here's hoping that the government regulators follow through on those revisions and seriously consider updating the site more often. Because the National Broadband Map has the potential to be a very useful tool for consumers - but it's not there yet.

**More information:** National Broadband Map:

[www.broadbandmap.gov/](http://www.broadbandmap.gov/)

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