

\$103M to expand broadband Internet in rural US

August 22 2011, By MICHAEL FELBERBAUM , AP Business Writer

Telecommunications companies in 16 states will share more than \$103 million in federal funding to help expand broadband Internet access to those areas of rural America that haven't been reached by the high-speed service or are underserved, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced Monday.

Policymakers, public interest groups and [telecom companies](#) are seeking to bridge the digital divide by reaching even the most remote pockets of the U.S. with [broadband](#) internet, hoping to improve economic and educational opportunities there.

"There's a big gap that remains between rural and urban areas because it's just hard to make a business case in [rural areas](#)," said Jonathan Adelstein, the agriculture department's rural utilities service administrator, in a conference call with reporters. "Rural areas' future depends upon access to broadband and we're not where we need to be today."

The states that will benefit from the funding are: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

As many as one in 10 Americans can't get Internet connections fast enough to engage in such common online activities as watching video or teleconferencing, and two thirds of schools have broadband connections

that are too slow to meet their needs, the Commerce Department reported earlier this year.

Last year, the [Federal Communications Commission](#) released a national broadband plan that set a goal of hooking up 100 million U.S. households to [broadband connections](#) of 100 [megabits](#) per second by 2020. That's at least 20 times faster than many existing home connections.

About 28 percent of rural America, or nearly 19 million people, lack access to Internet with speeds of three megabits per second or faster, compared with only 3 percent, or 7.2 million people, in non-rural areas, according to an FCC report titled "Bringing Broadband to Rural America."

Adelstein said rural areas lag behind the urban areas of the country when it comes to broadband Internet access because the more remote areas don't have enough people, have rugged terrain, or it's too costly for companies to serve them.

One of the grants announced Monday will help provide Internet services to about 570 members of the Karuk Native American Tribe in a mountainous region of Orleans, in northern California.

"It is a remarkably remote place. It's one of the darkest places from space in the lower 48" states, said Craig Tucker, a spokesman for the tribe.

Tucker said lack of reliable Internet services is a "limiting factor for economic development" for the tribe and the non-Native community that lives in the area as well.

"There's not really good cell phone service, or Internet service. Even

electricity is a struggle/ A lot of people are off the grid entirely," he said.

Another grant will help rebuild the broadband infrastructure in Tushka, Okla., which was hit by a tornado in April that killed two people and destroyed or damaged numerous buildings in the community.

Adlestein said there's still a "long way to go" in terms of bringing rural America in line with the rest of the country, and he added that one of the challenges is that young people won't stay in communities without broadband Internet access.

"There's not a future there for them," he said. "Not only do they expect it, but they need it ... if young people want to stay rural areas where they grew up."

The majority of the funding comes in the form of infrastructure loans of totaling about \$90 million for five broadband projects. These projects join others across the countries that are sharing \$192 million in loans announced by the Agriculture Department in late July.

About \$13 million of the funding is through the USDA's Community Connect program, which provides grants to rural, economically challenged communities. The funds can be used to build, buy or lease facilities to bring broadband access to community facilities such as schools and government offices, as well as residents and businesses.

The USDA funding is just one of several federal, state and local programs working to expand Internet access to rural parts of the country.

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