

FCC to Investigate Broadband Deployment

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The Federal Communications Commission announces an inquiry into whether broadband services are being provided to all Americans in a timely and reasonable fashion, and possible changes to methods of data collection that affect future broadband policy.

The Federal Communications Commission has begun action on two items involving broadband deployment in the United States. The first is a Notice of Inquiry into whether broadband services are being provided to all Americans in a timely and reasonable fashion. The second is a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on methods of collecting information needed to set broadband policy in the future. Both were announced by the Commission late on April 16.

According to a statement released by the FCC, based in Washington, the NOI is a response to a requirement in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 that requires the agency to determine whether broadband deployment is progressing as it should. The NPRM is intended to determine whether it's necessary to modify the collection of speed tier information to more accurately determine whether broadband deployment is meeting the needs of diverse communities in the United States.

"While we have made progress recently, as I have said before, there is more we can do," FCC Chairman Kevin Martin said in a statement. "For example, the Commission is committed to obtaining the best information possible about the deployment, access and affordability of broadband services nationwide," he said.

Martin said the NPRM will allow the FCC to get a better picture of broadband deployment. "The Notice asks questions about how we can obtain more specific information about broadband deployment and consumer acceptance in specific geographic areas and how we can combine our data with those collected at the state level or by other public sources," Martin said in the statement. "By improving our data collection, we will be able to identify more precisely those areas of the country where additional broadband deployment is needed."

Commissioner Michael Copps, agreeing with Martin, asked, "Can we finally agree that something drastic needs to be done?" Copps noted that the United States is 15th in the world in broadband penetration, and said the road was littered with "commercial and regulatory missteps."

"We can start by facing up to our problem and doing our level best to diagnose its causes. We need to know why so many Americans do not have broadband, and why those who do, or think they do, are paying twice as much for connections one-twentieth as fast those enjoyed by customers in some other countries," Copps continued in his statement. "This is not just an exercise in self-flagellation, though we certainly deserve that by now. Rather, it is the first step in coming up with some solutions that can start to reverse our nation's slide into technological and communications mediocrity."

Copps also suggested that the FCC's data gathering left a lot to be desired. In his comments about the NPRM, Copps said, "For several years now, I have been greatly disappointed by the Commission's broadband data-gathering and presentation. As scholars, industry and the - GAO - Government Accountability Office have documented, our semi-annual statistical reports currently fail to measure even basic concepts such as the extent of broadband deployment across the country, including in rural and tribal areas, and the degree of competition among broadband providers and modalities," Copps said.

Furthermore, Copps said, "Our statistical methodology seems almost calculated to obscure just how far our country is falling behind many other industrialized nations in broadband availability, adoption, speed and price.... Indeed, the lack of reliable government data on the present state of our broadband market is a fundamental obstacle to developing a national strategy to reverse our inexcusable broadband performance. Until we know where we stand today, how can we possibly build the broadband future that our nation deserves? And if the FCC doesn't gather this data, who will?"

Commissioner Robert McDowell said he's eagerly waiting for the reports. "I look forward to receiving the comments in both of these proceedings as part of the Commission's ongoing effort to continue to increase the rate of broadband penetration and foster more choices for all types of consumers," McDowell said in a statement. "We should continue to seize every opportunity to move America forward in this important area."

Dates on hearings for both items have yet to be announced.

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