



November 10, 2021

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Secretary Vilsack,

As you are well aware, reliable, high-speed broadband is essential to the health, social well-being, and economic prosperity of all American families. [Focus on Rural America](#) recognizes and appreciates the long-standing commitment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utility Service (RUS) to bring broadband access to unserved communities. We are concerned, however, about the impact of the recent ReConnect Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) which could undermine these efforts by failing to direct resources to unserved areas first. Instead, the FOA allows these funds to be used on duplicative broadband infrastructure in areas where there is already a binding obligation to build broadband utilizing funds from other federal broadband programs.

Rural communities are critical to the success of the nation, but too often the issues impacting these families and communities can be forgotten. In fact, nearly [1 in 5 Americans](#) in rural areas continue to lack access to high-speed broadband. Numbers like this help explain why so many rural Americans feel increasingly disconnected from a shared, prosperous future enjoyed by the rest of the country, especially as broadband access is needed now more than ever in today's modern landscape.

For these reasons I am writing to you to highlight the importance of using ReConnect funding to target truly unserved, often rural areas. Please consider this issue as you review applicants for funding, and place a priority on those providing service where there is none. Surely, communities with no service would meet the criteria of insufficient access, remoteness and social vulnerability. I am sure you will agree we must avoid duplicative federal funding and make certain funds are deployed to areas that need help most. With that in mind, I ask you guard against government-subsidized overbuilding in areas already supported by federal broadband programs, like the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF). If the unserved communities are not first in line, I fear isolated areas will continue to be left behind, which will impede progress on the Administration's goal of reaching 100% connectivity across the country.

Limited federal funds for broadband expansion must be used efficiently and effectively to ensure that every community receives access to broadband, without delay. I commend you for your efforts to bridge the digital divide and look forward to standing with you and your department to connect more unserved Americans.

Thank you for your continued leadership on this issue.

Sincerely,

Patty Judge
Focus on Rural America