

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

3/29/22

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, Southwest  
Washington, DC 20250-1590

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We write today to ask you to ensure that the Rural Utilities Service's (RUS) Rural eConnectivity (ReConnect) Pilot Program remains focused on the urgent task of connecting unserved rural Americans and closing the digital divide.

For years, rural communities had been left behind because they are simply too remote and too uneconomic to serve without the assistance of targeted broadband subsidies.

Since its creation in 2018, the ReConnect Pilot Program has played a critical role in funding broadband deployment to communities in rural America that lack access to broadband service, administering two rounds of funding for broadband deployment. The ReConnect program applied lessons learned from previous programs to be more effective in directing funding to unserved rural communities. First, ReConnect funding has been targeted to rural areas where at least 90 percent of households do not have access to broadband. These are the parts of rural America that have remained truly unserved. Second, the ReConnect program has made careful use of funding by avoiding overbuilding areas that are already in the process of receiving broadband through another funding program. These important guardrails, and other reforms, such as improving broadband coverage data through a challenge process, and opening the program to additional qualified broadband providers, have helped ReConnect successfully target funding and deployment of service to truly unserved areas.

Unfortunately, recent developments could upend this progress. We are troubled by the Round 3 ReConnect guidelines that could allow a new broadband provider to obtain funding to build a broadband network to serve the very same area awarded to another provider that has received funding from other programs like the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF). We are also concerned that reducing the unserved threshold from 90 percent to 50 percent for funding as required by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) will once again shift dollars away from the rural areas that are most in need of broadband.

Instead of dedicating valuable funding to completing the task of finally connecting unserved rural communities, the next round of ReConnect could direct a substantial amount of funding to areas that already have robust broadband service. Given the unprecedented amount of broadband funding that has now been appropriated through the IIJA, our concerns about duplication of Federal resources are magnified. In addition, we are concerned that the application is unduly difficult to complete and prevents many broadband providers from applying for funding.

Due to the large number of new Federal and State broadband programs that will be distributing broadband funds, it is imperative that ReConnect work in a complementary – not duplicative – manner with the FCC’s RDOF program, as well as the NTIA, Treasury, and state broadband programs to maximize the combined impact and reach as many different rural communities as possible. Duplicating service in project areas funded by other government agencies’ programs will only harm the effort to close the digital divide and continue to leave many Americans without access to reliable, affordable, and high-speed internet.

As USDA implements the current and future rounds of ReConnect funding, the agency should carefully consider the impact of these policies on rural America. We encourage the agency to take every possible action to prioritize funding for communities with the highest percentages of unserved households and for communities that are not being addressed through another broadband funding program. These actions are vital to meet our shared goal of connecting all Americans.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Kat Cammack  
Member of Congress



Jim Costa  
Member of Congress



Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.  
Member of Congress



Rodney Davis  
Member of Congress



Austin Scott  
Member of Congress



Jimmy Panetta  
Member of Congress



G. K. Butterfield  
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Dusty Johnson  
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Vicky Hartzler  
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Salud Carbajal  
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Chris Pappas  
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Doug LaMalfa  
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David Rouzer  
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Kurt Schrader  
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Anthony G. Brown  
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Barry Moore  
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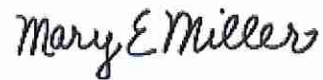
James R. Baird  
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