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October 31, 2012

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

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

I write to request the modernization of eligibility standards for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service Community Connect Grants. The Community Connect Grant Program funds broadband infrastructure projects that provide rural communities access to broadband internet. Without access to high-speed broadband internet, rural areas face significant barriers to economic development, and educational and health care resources. For these reasons, Community Connect provides an economic lifeline to underserved rural areas around the nation.

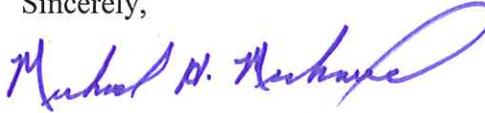
While I remain strongly supportive of the Community Connect Program, I believe the program's definition for Broadband Transmission Service (broadband) is outdated and must be increased to match current needs and technological standards. Set at 200 kilobits per second (Kbps), the broadband definition is used to determine eligibility of grant applications and has remained unchanged since the program's creation a decade ago. Since that time, technology has advanced significantly. What was once considered "high-speed" broadband internet is now inadequate for modern businesses and educators.

Due to this outdated broadband definition, many underserved rural communities around the nation are not eligible to compete for Community Connect. These communities have internet that is slightly better than Community Connect's 200 Kbps threshold, but still far too slow for common web applications that businesses need to be competitive in the modern economy. The high cost of expanding broadband infrastructure and low subscriber base in rural areas often prevents private investment. At the same time, it places USDA Broadband Access Loans out of reach for the most rural areas that lack the population or funds necessary to repay a loan.

FCC and USDA broadband access programs have already updated their broadband standards. In 2010, the FCC updated its broadband speed benchmark from 200 Kbps to 4 Mbps for downloads and 1 Mbps for uploads. The FCC also released its National Broadband Plan which set a national target of universal broadband access by 2020. It seeks to ensure that every house and business in America has affordable access to the new broadband internet speeds. The USDA's own Rural Broadband Access Loan program has updated its broadband speed eligibility standards as well. Today, financially capable rural communities can apply for Broadband Access Loans if their existing internet is slower than 3 Mbps.

By increasing the broadband eligibility standards, USDA will ensure that more communities with inadequate internet can expand broadband access to their residents and businesses. It will promote better educational opportunities, enabling students in rural areas to access the web pages and videos necessary for distance learning programs. It will also give our rural businesses the online tools that are critical for future economic growth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michael D. Michaud". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Michael Michaud
Member of Congress

CC: John Padalino, Acting Administrator, USDA Rural Utilities Service