

Rep. Pocan: House members reintroduce bipartisan legislation to make funding available for rural broadband projects

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WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Representatives Mark Pocan (WI-02), Cheri Bustos (IL-17), Jared Huffman (CA-02), Hal Rogers (KY-05), and Elise Stefanik (NY-21) today reintroduced the Broadband Connections for Rural Opportunities Program Act, also known as the B-CROP Act. This bipartisan bill would award grant funding to rural broadband projects in high-need in combination with the current loan funding available through USDA's Rural Utilities Service. U.S. Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) introduced companion legislation in the U.S. Senate earlier this year.

"Access to reliable, high-speed internet service is vital to communities across America, especially to small businesses and students," said Congressman Pocan. "Yet, in rural areas, including parts of my district in Wisconsin, over a third of the population doesn't have access to quality broadband. The Broadband Connections for Rural Opportunities Program (B-CROP) Act will increase resources to update and expand broadband infrastructure. I'm proud to work with my colleagues to help close the broadband gap so all communities can have a reliable connection."

"Every aspect of our rural communities will be improved by high-speed internet access," said Congresswoman Bustos. "You can't run a modern-day business, school, hospital or clinic with spotty and unreliable internet, and too many of our rural communities across the country are not equipped to be competitive in the

digital economy. This bill is part of our plan to bring better jobs, better wages, and a better future to all Americans, and I am proud to help introduce this much-needed legislation.”

“Closing the digital divide in rural America and Indian country is essential to economic opportunity and public safety,” said Congressman Huffman. “We cannot continue to leave behind Americans in rural communities who need fair access to quality health care, public safety, and education services, as well as the job opportunities that the digital economy offers. I’m glad to join with lawmakers from both sides of the aisle today to rise above partisanship and introduce the Broadband Connections for Rural Opportunities Program (B-CROP) Act, which would empower rural communities to advance broadband deployment.”

“Broadband is America’s modern day interstate highway for business, communications and emergency response. Without it, rural parts of the country are missing out on economic diversity, educational advancements, telemedicine and much more,” said Congressman Hal Rogers. “What’s good for rural America is good for the entire country. I’m proud to join my friend, Rep. Mark Pocan, in support of the B-CROP bill to bring our smaller communities onto the global grid to explore new innovative ideas and create more jobs in the homeland.

“Broadband is critical infrastructure in a 21st century economy so that our North Country businesses can compete around the globe,” said Congresswoman Stefanik. “Broadband access is also important to ensuring our children have access to the educational resources they need to succeed. This important legislation would provide greater resources to build this 21st Century infrastructure in the North Country and in rural areas across our nation. I am pleased to join Congressman Pocan to introduce this bipartisan legislation in the House, and I urge my colleagues to support this effort.”

“NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association applauds Rep. Pocan for his leadership in introducing this legislation in the U.S. House. As a founding member of the Congressional Rural Broadband Caucus, his ongoing efforts to address and overcome the challenges of deploying and sustaining broadband in rural America are greatly appreciated,” said NTCA CEO Shirley Bloomfield. “We believe the Broadband Connections for Rural Opportunities Program (B-CROP) legislation can help promote the deployment of robust broadband networks in rural areas that are the most challenging to serve. NTCA looks forward to working with members of Congress to tackle the important issues addressed by this legislation.”

The B-CROP Act proposes policies to target federal funds to rural and tribal areas in the highest of need to connect all Americans, regardless of where they live, work, or retire, to the technology necessary to succeed in the 21st century. Without access to high-quality, affordable broadband service, workers have fewer opportunities for good-paying jobs, farmers and business owners are isolated from new markets, children are limited in their educational opportunities and health care providers do not have reliable access to the most advanced technology available to help patients.

Specifically, the B-CROP Act does the following:

- Allows for grants of up to 50 percent of a project's cost, and up to 75 percent for remote, high-need areas, to be awarded in combination with the current loan funding available through USDA's Rural Utilities Service.
- Helps enhance the economic feasibility of projects serving rural and tribal areas.
- Gives highest priority to projects in areas that are currently unserved by high-speed broadband.
- Coordinates with the FCC's Universal Service High-Cost Support programs to complement those federal investments, responsibly spending taxpayer money.
- Increases the authorized funding for RUS's Broadband programs to \$50 million per fiscal year.
- Provides adequate resources to private-sector providers — including corporations, LLCs, cooperatives or mutual organizations, state or local governments and Indian tribes or tribal organizations — to expand broadband access to unserved rural areas.
- Gives partnership projects special attention, including initiatives that leverage matching funds and that work with anchor institutions like health centers, libraries, colleges, universities and other educational entities.