



Rural Internet Services Policy Development 2015

Issue:

Internet speed and capabilities continue to grow in urban areas across the country. However in many rural areas the option for even the most moderate speed internet services is not available. Wireless and satellite services, which are the most likely to be available in these areas, offer limited speeds and capped usage amounts. There continues to be a growing demand for moderate speed access in the agricultural sector. Many areas across Tennessee still lack these options in order to make necessary and economically prudent upgrades.

Giving municipal providers their ability to expand beyond their municipal boundaries could help underserved or unserved areas gain access to broadband internet service. In an age where technology is a major part of a farming operation, limited access handicaps business capabilities of farmers and rural businesses.

Questions:

1. Should Farm Bureau support expansion of municipal providers outside city limits?
2. Should Farm Bureau support competition between government and private entities? Is this an exception?
3. Do you believe moderate speed internet service should be considered an essential utility?
4. Have private providers adequately expanded services to rural areas?

Background:

Proposed legislation allows municipal utility providers to offer services outside their boundaries. Most notably, it allows these providers to offer available internet services to these areas which are outside city limits. A variety of farm information, marketing and automation tools rely on dependable access.

Some providers who could expand are government owned or government assisted. Because private providers own a sizable portion of the market share, most oppose expansion of services by municipal providers. Supporters of the proposal argue private providers have been given ample time and opportunity to expand services to rural areas, while critics say it does not make economic sense.

Aside from the rural business solutions that internet services provide, social and political advantages should also be considered. Today's social media capabilities are limitless. They provide opportunity to connect globally and change the way the world communicates. Web videos and electronic communication with elected officials have become standard. Every lawmaker receives email communication and some prefer it. The Congress and the General Assembly have put considerable effort into opening every meeting on the web. This is particularly advantageous to those with moderate to high speed internet connections.

Farm Bureau Policy

Rural residents lag the rest of the nation when it comes to use of high-speed Internet connections. Although the gap between rural and non-rural home broadband adoption is narrowing, there are still substantial gaps. Rural residents need speeds, availability and affordability in parity with urban and suburban areas.

We support increasing access to high speed Internet connections in rural areas through any source, including wireless, by using a combination of tax incentives, grants and/or regulations to providers of the service.