



**PRESS RELEASE**

***Coalition works to expand rural e-connectivity***

*Ag Secretary Perdue, FCC Chair Pai join coalition to kick-off listening sessions*

**WASHINGTON, D.C. April 18, 2018:** A coalition of stakeholders committed to the expansion of broadband services in rural America today launched the first in a series of workshops to focus attention on the wide-ranging challenges to achieving connectivity, and the opportunities improved e-connectivity could bring to the people and economies of the nation’s rural regions.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai joined executives from the five partner organizations—Farm Foundation, NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association (NTCA), National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), CoBank, and the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation (CFC)—in kicking off the listening sessions by highlighting the importance of e-connectivity to all sectors of rural America.

The next listening session will be in June 2018 in Minnesota, with additional sessions to be completed over the next six months.

“Broadband is vital to the rural economy in what is now a highly interconnected global marketplace,” said Tom Halverson, President and CEO of CoBank. “We need leaders on both sides of the aisle in Washington to work together to facilitate broadband investment and ensure that rural America remains competitive and strong.”



*Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue joined a coalition of stakeholders this morning to launch a series of listening session on challenges to achieve e-connectivity in rural America.*

Achieving e-connectivity across rural America is not a simple task. “Actions needed to improve e-connectivity vary widely by community and region,” notes Farm Foundation President and CEO Constance Cullman. “These listening sessions will serve to highlight common issues, success stories to build strong broadband systems, and challenges that are yet to be met.”

Executives from regional telecommunications companies participated in the kickoff to provide perspectives on the broadband service issues. This panel included Levoy Knowles of the Tennessee Telecommunications Association, Mel Coleman of the North Arkansas Electric Cooperative, and Ken Johnson, Administrator of Rural Development’s Rural Utilities Service.

“We are excited for the prospects of enhanced cooperation and coordination between USDA, the FCC, and private operators like those in NTCA’s membership—all of whom recognize the value of and critical need for sustainable broadband in rural America. In that spirit, it is an honor to have both USDA Secretary Perdue and FCC Chairman Pai offer remarks at today’s kickoff event,” said NTCA CEO Shirley Bloomfield. “NTCA’s nearly 850 members connect many of America’s rural communities to the world with robust broadband, and we are pleased to participate in this collaborative effort to promote better access to rural broadband.”

Rural electric cooperatives are well aware of the needs of e-connectivity in their communities, and more than 100 electric cooperatives already are providing broadband service to their members. “The widening digital divide is a national crisis deserving of a national response,” said Jim Matheson, CEO of NRECA. “For decades, electric cooperatives have enhanced the quality of life throughout rural America. Now, many of those same electric co-ops are helping reinvigorate rural economies by bringing broadband to rural homes, businesses and farms. High costs to serve areas with low population density remain the biggest obstacle to expanded rural broadband access. An expanded combination of federal grant and loan funding through USDA is a critical step to connecting rural America.”

Stakeholders emphasized the need for collaborative efforts to enhance broadband services in rural America. “Leveraging additional investment in rural broadband infrastructure will require a team effort,” said Sheldon Petersen, CEO of CFC. “Local partnerships can be a wonderful way to leverage resources, expertise and efficiencies to ensure that rural communities can fully participate in today’s 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.”

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*Farm Foundation is an agricultural policy institute cultivating dynamic non-partisan collaboration to meet society's needs for food, fiber, feed and energy. Since 1933, the Farm Foundation has connected leaders in farming, business, academia, organizations and government through proactive, rigorous debate and objective issue analysis.*



*CoBank is a national cooperative bank serving vital industries across rural America. The bank provides loans, leases, export financing and other financial services to agribusinesses and rural power, water and communications providers in all 50 states. CoBank is a member of the Farm Credit System, a nationwide network of banks and retail lending associations chartered to support the borrowing needs of U.S. agriculture and the nation's rural economy. In addition to serving its direct retail borrowers, the bank also provides wholesale loans and other financial services to affiliated Farm Credit associations serving approximately 70,000 farmers, ranchers and other rural borrowers in 23 states around the country.*



**NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association (NTCA)** represents nearly 850 independent, community-based telecommunications companies that are leading innovation in rural and small-town America. NTCA advocates on behalf of its members in the legislative and regulatory arenas, and it provides training and development; publications and industry events; and an array of employee benefit programs. In an era of transformative technological advancements, regulatory challenges and marketplace competition, NTCA members are leading the technological evolution for rural consumers, delivering robust and high-quality services over future-proof networks that make rural communities vibrant places in which to live and do business.



**The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA)** is the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives. From growing suburbs to remote farming communities, electric co-ops serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56 percent of the nation’s landscape. As local businesses built by the consumers they serve, electric cooperatives have meaningful ties to rural America and invest \$12 billion annually in their communities.



**National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation (CFC)** is the nonprofit finance cooperative created and owned by America’s Electric Cooperative Network. CFC provides financing to members in 48 states, the District of Columbia and two U.S. territories. CFC also provides services to telecommunications systems that are members of the Rural Telephone Finance Cooperative (RTFC).



**National Rural Utilities  
Cooperative Finance Corporation**

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