



**Electric Cooperatives
of Arkansas**

Rural America Needs Robust Broadband Service

Background: As each day passes without access to robust broadband service in rural America, the digital divide widens between our urban and rural populations. Rural electric cooperatives provide electricity to more than 42 million Americans. We serve the lowest population density by mile, averaging just 7 consumer owners per mile of line. In the 1930s, electric cooperatives brought electricity to rural America when the for-profit utilities would not. Today, that same scenario is being replayed as broadband service is not being deployed universally throughout rural America. Without access to robust broadband, rural Americans cannot take advantage of the educational opportunities or employment prospects that most Americans now take for granted. Electric cooperatives need access to robust broadband service to manage their systems. As technology advances in the electric industry, utilities need more sophisticated telecommunications technology. Our member cooperatives deploy automated metering systems, energy efficiency and demand response programs, and grid monitoring systems that require real-time communication in order to provide safe, reliable electricity 24 hours a day.

Electric cooperatives are pursuing and implementing plans utilizing varied models to deploy broadband to rural America. Through the Recovery Act broadband programs delivered by the Rural Utilities Service and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 13 cooperatives in 9 states received funding for system designs that included fiber to the home, middle mile, microwave and wireless technology. In addition, the Rural Broadband Loan program at the Rural Utilities Service is enabling incremental progress toward bridging the digital divide between rural and urban America.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is finalizing rules to implement Phase II of the Connect America Fund which will provide support to build out broadband in unserved areas of the country. In 2014, over 100 electric cooperatives in 26 states filed Expressions of Interest in the FCC's Rural Broadband Experiments program and 23 filed formal applications for the program. Eight electric cooperatives were provisional winners in the Rural Broadband Experiment Program. In total, over 50 electric cooperatives across the country have built, or are currently building systems to bring needed broadband service to their service territories.

Last year, both the House and Senate launched bipartisan Broadband Caucus groups to facilitate discussion, educate Members of Congress and staff, and develop policy solutions to the digital divide that exists in rural America. Most recently, these two groups sent letters to President Trump urging him to include broadband in any infrastructure package that the Administration brings to Congress.

Electric Cooperatives of Arkansas Position. As Congress, the FCC, and the Administration develop proposals to spur broadband deployment, we believe that all potential providers, including electric cooperatives, should be eligible for programs designed to bridge the digital divide. Any effort to bring robust broadband service to rural America must be an open and inclusive process that allows all eligible providers the ability to compete for opportunities. Further, reform should affirm that regulation of Pole Attachment Rates for electric co-ops belongs at the state and local co-op level.

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