

Dear Senators,

Thank you for giving Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, the state's largest general farm organization, the opportunity to offer some thoughts on broadband in Pennsylvania, and the funding and legislative changes we believe are necessary to aid deployment.

Briefly stated, this pandemic has shown there are haves and have nots when it comes to adequate broadband service in Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, that disproportionately impacts rural communities more than its suburban counterparts. What that means is that rural school children have a harder time learning from home, seniors can't take advantage of telemedicine, and working parents cannot telecommute. Many rural communities are only serviced by satellite internet service, which can become spotty during times of heavy cloud cover or bad storms. Fiber is simply not available in some rural communities.

From a business perspective, this puts many in the agriculture community at a competitive disadvantage. Technology is fundamentally changing agriculture—from the ability to collect real-time harvest data—to robotic milking. Each is dependent on adequate broadband service to work properly. But even farmers who simply want to start selling products directly to consumers in farm markets need high speed broadband service to take credit card transactions. That service is not available in every rural area.

Broadly speaking, we see the need for two parallel tracks to solve the broadband issue in Pennsylvania: funding, and legislative changes.

Pennsylvania made an important step last year with the creation of the Underserved High-speed Broadband Funding Program Account under the Commonwealth Financing Authority, which will allow state government grants to be awarded to private companies that will start or expand service to underserved rural areas. Currently, that is funded with a \$5 million annual allocation. While a good first step, clearly additional funding is needed—whether it is state investment, or the funneling of federal dollars into this program.

From a legislative perspective, we see the need to make several changes to improve the deployment of broadband. Last year, the Joint State Government Commission released a comprehensive report on the state of broadband in Pennsylvania, and made several recommendations to improve deployment. It's first recommendation calls for the creation of a statewide broadband authority, comprised of officials from the administration, General Assembly, stakeholder groups and private enterprise to map out a strategy for deployment, and act as a resource for private companies and communities. Rep. Pam Snyder is expected to soon introduce legislation to create this authority, and our organization supports its creation.

Secondly, it is time for Pennsylvania to revisit 30 regulations, last updated in 2004. Chapter 30 puts a statutory definition of broadband that is woefully outdated. The current Federal Communications Commission definition of broadband is 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload speed. We think that is a good starting point for bringing the state's broadband definition up to modern standards.

In addition, our Chapter 30 regulations put limitations on the ability of local governments to offer broadband service. In order to offer service, local governments must first obtain the approval of incumbent local carriers to determine if they have any plans of offering or expanding service—such as increasing upload and download speeds. This arraignment worked in 2004 when broadband was a new frontier and private companies were concerned about local governments having an unfair advantage of being able to offer service. That was 17 years ago, and the landscape around broadband has changed. Private enterprise has concentrated their work at building service in areas where it is less costly to do so—namely urban and suburban areas.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau supports giving local governments the ability to offer broadband service in their communities if they so choose. It will level the playing field and drive service in areas where private enterprise may have no interest in expanding. To be sure, many local governments may be in no position to provide such a service. But state government should not restrict the ability of those who want to offer service, or for multiple municipalities to be able to partner together on such projects. Pennsylvania needs to take an all-of-the-above approach to offering service. To that end, it is worth asking whether our Chapter 30 regulations governing broadband make sense in 2021.

Pennsylvania Farm bureau is committed to working with the General Assembly this session to advance broadband legislation. We know that building service is not an easy fix, nor will a single piece of legislation solve the problem. Please know that we are committed to working with you on this key issue. At the end of the day, we believe in rural Pennsylvania and want to make sure that it remains vibrant and a great place to live and run a business.