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USDA Official: States and Localities Need Skin in the Game for Rural Broadband to Succeed (<https://www.telecompetitor.com/usda-official-states-and-localities-need-skin-in-the-game-for-rural-broadband-to-succeed/>)

1/2/19 at 9:39 AM by Joan Engebretson (<https://www.telecompetitor.com/author/joane/>)



When decision makers consider who should receive some of the \$600 million

allocated to the USDA ReConnect rural broadband pilot program, the agency will use a scoring system that awards points based on a range of factors, including the number of educational and healthcare facilities that would receive service – and for serving parts of states that have their own broadband funding programs. The latter criteria was included with the goal of “leveraging funding from outside sources” to “maximize the use of very limited resources,” said Anne Hazlett, Assistant to the Secretary for Rural Development at the USDA, in an interview with Telecompetitor.

“We believe the federal government has a role, but we also need to see skin in the game from states and local communities because this is an issue that really touches the quality of life in rural America,” said Hazlett, whose responsibilities include overseeing the USDA Rural Utilities Service program and several other units within USDA.

Hazlett pointed to another example of how the USDA aims to maximize the impact of limited funding: Applicants will be able to request funding (<https://www.telecompetitor.com/usda-reconnect-rural-broadband-pilot-rules-released-allocates-600m-in-loans-and-grants/>) in the form of a loan, a grant or a combination of loan and grant.

USDA ReConnect Rural Broadband Pilot

The USDA ReConnect rural broadband pilot will be open to a wide range of entities, including state and local governments and non-profit organizations, as well as for-profit corporations, limited liability companies, cooperatives and Indian tribes.

In our interview, Hazlett pointed to incumbent rural telecom carriers and rural electric cooperatives (RECs), specifically, as entities that could help bring high-speed broadband to areas where it is not available today.

She noted that the USDA “has a long history of working with rural telcos” and also noted that “**this time we have the opportunity to work with electric cooperatives**” as well.

She added that “because of the [pilot program] flexibility and who is eligible and the way we can shape the parameters, many believe rural electric cooperatives are a key stakeholder– they successfully deployed electric infrastructure,” raising the question “are they an entity that can help us connect rural America” via “an opportunity to engage in ways we haven’t in the past.”

USDA’s enthusiasm about rural electric cooperatives may be fueled, at least in part, by RECs’ strong showing (<https://www.telecompetitor.com/a-deeper-dive-on-caf-ii-winners-the-new-carriers-of-last-resort/>) in the recent Connect America Fund CAF II auction of rural broadband funding.

In shaping the rules and scoring system for awarding ReConnect Rural Broadband Pilot funding, USDA drew upon 280 comments filed earlier this year in response to a request for feedback, on visits made by Hazlett and Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to rural areas and on lessons learned as administrators of the broadband stimulus program during the early part of this decade.

Input received from service providers and other rural stakeholders emphasized several key themes, Hazlett noted.

“People are certainly concerned that we build at a speed that will meet some of the needs of the future,” she said.

She also noted that **existing service providers urged the agency to make sure funding was not used in a way that would overbuild existing infrastructure.**


Other key themes included the importance of broadband to precision agriculture, healthcare and education.

This feedback shaped various aspects of the program, including the scoring criteria, a speed target of 25 Mbps downstream and 3 Mbps upstream, and **provisions aimed at preventing overbuilding** (<https://reconnect.usda.gov/s/article/Eligible-Service-Area>), such as a requirement that no more than 10% of locations in a project have broadband at speeds of 10/1 Mbps and **a provision that makes CAF II- funded areas eligible only for loans, not grants.**

As for lessons learned from the broadband stimulus program, Hazlett noted that “we understood from past experience the need for outreach.”

That understanding drove the USDA to release documents (<https://reconnect.usda.gov/s/article/Funding-Opportunity-Announcement>) December 14 explaining how to apply for ReConnect rural broadband pilot funding even though the agency will not begin accepting applications for several months.

That move, she said, should help people get any technical assistance they might need to submit applications.

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