

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

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May 9, 2019

The Honorable Ajit V. Pai
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street Southwest
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairman Pai:

As the congressional delegation from the State of South Dakota, we write to you regarding ongoing efforts by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to identify the quality, accuracy, and usefulness of the data it collects on fixed and mobile broadband service in the United States. Only 65 percent of Americans in rural areas have access to high-speed fixed service, and on tribal lands, barely 60 percent have access compared to 97 percent of those in urban areas. Accurate broadband availability maps are a critical tool in closing the digital divide.

Current broadband availability maps are based largely upon whatever information may be received from providers. Although the FCC's database may represent the most complete repository of such information available today, there are several problems with the current maps. One example is that the maps are not granular enough. In the context of fixed broadband, an entire census block, which can be a large area in rural America, will appear as served even if service is offered to only one location within that census block. This can ultimately result in the denial funding or financing in such areas, leaving many locations without essential broadband service because they share a census block with a served household. Another significant concern is that the maps ultimately represent invalidated reports from providers. While providers certify as to the accuracy of information presented, the processes used to verify such information before funding or financing decisions are made can vary, and in many cases, such processes do not exist at all, meaning that funding or financing decisions flow directly from the maps themselves.


We are writing to ask the FCC to take immediate steps to address such concerns. In the first instance, it is important for the FCC to develop more standardized granular reporting of broadband availability while also balancing the burdens of reporting for smaller operators. One approach that could accomplish this is by having providers submit shapefiles, which show where service is actually available by detailing the actual contours of a provider's service area. Moreover, regardless of the method used to demonstrate broadband availability on a more granular basis, it is important to ensure separately and distinctly the accuracy of that more granular data.

As the Mobility Fund experience with wireless mapping indicated, reliance only upon self-reported data will not yield helpful information or good results. Therefore, we encourage the FCC to establish a meaningful challenge processes that will enable better validation of both fixed and mobile data prior to relying upon such data in making funding or financing decisions.

High-speed broadband services are vital to America's rural residents. Broadband connectivity provides opportunities for advancements in health care, education, and economic development. Thus, it is critical that the FCC take swift action to update its broadband data and mapping to ensure inaccurate information will not result in a denial of access to fixed or mobile broadband. A validated set of data based upon standardized methods of granular reporting will be essential to ensuring that universal service is available throughout rural America.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to working with you as the Commission continues its efforts to ensure all Americans have access to robust and reliable broadband.

Sincerely,


JOHN THUNE
United States Senator


M. MICHAEL ROUNDS
United States Senator


DUSTY JOHNSON
Member of Congress



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

May 23, 2019

The Honorable John Thune
United States Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Thune:

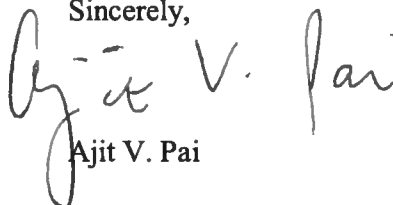
Thank you for your letter regarding broadband mapping. Closing the digital divide is my top priority. I have seen for myself in 45 states, including South Dakota, and the territories of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands what affordable high-speed Internet access can do for a community—for its families, its schools, its hospitals, its farms, its businesses—as well as the impact of its absence.

I agree that using updated and accurate broadband deployment data is critical to bridging the digital divide. We need to understand where broadband is available and where it is not to target our efforts and direct funding to areas that are most in needed. That is why the Commission took two basic reforms to the collection of broadband data when I came into office. First, we initiated a new data collection for mobile broadband coverage as part of Phase II of the Mobility fund (which included a robust challenge process). Second, we began a top-to-bottom review of the Form 477 process to ensure that broadband data was more accurate, granular, and ultimately useful to the Commission and the public.

In your letter, you ask the Commission seriously consider verifications mechanisms, specifically a challenge process to improve the validation of data submitted to broadband availability databases. I believe a public feedback mechanism could improve the Commission's broadband coverage maps and Form 477 data. Indeed, as you may know, the Commission's Speed Test App is one way that consumers can currently participate in collecting data about broadband deployment, and it has proven to be a useful tool for assessing service availability. I've asked Commission staff to look into other ways to collect and use accurate data from many sources—including consumers themselves—to assemble a more reliable map. We are interested in developing methods for the submission of reliable, consumer-driven data to better inform the Commission's decision making in this area. We would be happy to receive any input you or your staff might have on how to establish and implement such methods.

I appreciate your continued interest in working with the FCC to close the digital divide and look forward to continuing to collaborate on this issue. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,



Ajit V. Pai



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

May 23, 2019

The Honorable Mike Rounds
United States Senate
502 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Rounds:

Thank you for your letter regarding broadband mapping. Closing the digital divide is my top priority. I have seen for myself in 45 states, including South Dakota, and the territories of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands what affordable high-speed Internet access can do for a community—for its families, its schools, its hospitals, its farms, its businesses—as well as the impact of its absence.

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Ajit V. Pai



FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

May 23, 2019

The Honorable Dusty Johnson
U.S. House of Representatives
1508 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Johnson:

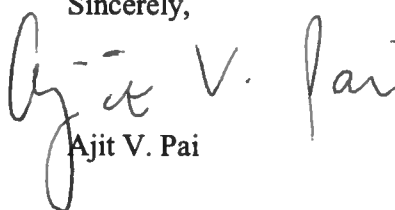
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