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OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE

CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON
WORKFORCE PROTECTIONS

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-2207

Received & Inspected

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FCC Mail Room

August 13, 2014

Mr. Thomas Wheeler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20554

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Dear Chairman Wheeler:

On behalf of my constituents in the 7th Congressional District of Michigan, I respectfully urge the FCC take appropriate steps to ensure Connect America Fund ("CAF") Phase II is allocated in a manner to guarantee its goals of providing broadband service to the most rural parts of our country. Whether it is a non-traditional option, like the rural electric cooperative that serves much of my district, or a price cap or rate-of-return carrier, a publicly-driven, open and competitive process will yield the best solution for rural Americans currently on the wrong side of our nation's digital divide. Broadband has quickly become a necessity of life for rural America, and is essential for the continued growth, productivity and economic competitiveness for many of the communities I represent. As such the current gaps in rural broadband access must be addressed and warrant the FCC's consideration of new options that encourage competition and result in meaningful solutions.

As you are aware, in response to the rural trials set forth in your January 31, 2014 Order, more than 1,000 expressions of interest were filed with the FCC providing ideas and solutions to the issue of broadband coverage in un-served and underserved parts of rural America. I believe this response signifies a market interest that bodes well for rural America and I look forward to seeing the results of the Rural Experiments this fall.

As the FCC moves forward with CAF Phase II, I encourage you to deliberate thoughtfully to ensure the goals of CAF are realized. Due to the significant funds behind this initiative it is imperative that we get this right. If the goal of CAF is to promote access to robust broadband infrastructure, we must take steps to incent those platforms and those entities possessing both the appetite and ability to deploy meaningful network solutions in the rural space. For example, with the infrastructure and billing relationships already in place, allowing electric coops to compete for CAF Phase II funding would help increase competition and encourage more affordable pricing and improved broadband access for rural consumers.

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The next five years has the potential of closing a digital divide that now limits opportunities for much of my district. From agriculture to education, job opportunities to simple daily tasks, next-generation broadband is as essential in rural areas as it is to the rest of the country. I urge the FCC to stay the current course implemented in the Rural Experiments and allow all interested parties to compete to bring robust broadband to rural areas. The CAF disbursement process must encourage universal access, competition, public input and a robust broadband solution for rural America.

Sincerely,



TIM WALBERG
Member of Congress



OFFICE OF
THE CHAIRMAN

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

September 23, 2014

The Honorable Tim Walberg
U.S. House of Representatives
418 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Walberg:

Thank you for your letter regarding implementation of certain aspects of Phase II of the Connect America Fund (CAF Phase II). I appreciate your views and will ensure your letter is included in the record of the proceeding and considered as part of the Commission's review.

I agree with you that high-speed broadband access is an essential component for economic growth in rural communities. The universal service program is one of the most important tools at our disposal to ensure that consumers and businesses in rural America have the same opportunities as their urban and suburban counterparts to be active participants in the United States of the 21st century. We are focused on updating the universal service high-cost program to ensure that we are delivering the best possible voice and broadband experiences to rural America. Thus, I also agree with you that it is important that we allow all interested parties an opportunity to compete in order to bring robust broadband to rural areas through the receipt of support from the Connect America Fund. The Commission's goal is to bring broadband to all Americans, and I believe it is critical that we have a universal service program that supports any and all providers who are willing to step up and deliver service, consistent with the Commission's performance standards.

In April, the Commission voted to move forward with Phase II of the Connect America Fund in areas served by the larger telephone companies (known as price-cap carriers). Among other things, the *Connect America Fund Phase II Report and Order* sets a term of 10 years for support to be awarded through a competitive bidding process in areas where the incumbent provider is unwilling to serve based on model-based support amounts to be offered by the Commission. In states where the incumbent declines the offer, the Commission will initiate a competitive bidding process, which will be open to any entity interested in serving eligible areas, including electric cooperatives.

As you also note, the Commission took an important step forward last January when, in our unanimously adopted *Technology Transitions Order*, we authorized experiments to advance the deployment of voice and broadband-capable networks in rural areas with support from the CAF. In order to inform our policies on building next-generation networks in rural America, the Commission invited parties to submit expressions of interest to determine the level of interest in constructing high-bandwidth networks in rural, high-cost areas, including Tribal lands. Our initial announcement of rural broadband experiments received an enthusiastic response in the

form of over 1,000 expressions of interest from a wide range of entities, including rural electric cooperatives, proposing service over diverse technologies.

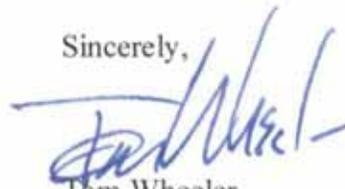
A *Rural Broadband Experiments Order* adopted by the Commission at our July Open Meeting builds on what we authorized in January by establishing a budget of \$100 million for funding rural broadband experiments in price cap areas. The *Order* sets an objective, clear-cut methodology for selecting winning applications and outlines the conditions that participating entities must meet in order to receive support, including specific eligibility, build-out, and accountability requirements. Now that we have clearly established the criteria for the experiments, interested entities must submit a formal application to the Commission no later than October 14, 2014. Applicants will compete nationwide for the funds, which will be awarded to projects that are most cost-effective. We hope to have the process completed by the end of 2014 because these experiments will allow us to explore how to structure the CAF Phase II competitive bidding process in price-cap areas, anticipated to occur later in 2015, and gather valuable information about deploying next-generation networks in high-cost areas.

Importantly, this effort will result in a competition-based mechanism to award universal support to bring broadband to rural America. Competition holds the promise of better services for rural America at lower costs. Better service at lower cost is the result of broadband competition in other areas of the country, and it is time to use that same dynamic for the benefit of rural America.

I look forward to working with you as we continue reforming and modernizing the universal service fund high-cost program – as well as other components of the Fund – to ensure that all Americans have access to robust voice and broadband services.

I appreciate your interest in this matter. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,



Tom Wheeler