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Farm Bill Expands Rural Broadband Funding.

But some remain concerned that the money will not get to many places that need it to expand access.

The farm bill passed by Congress this week would grant the U.S. Department of Agriculture more authority to create grants and provide loans for local rural broadband projects.

The compromise legislation, which has been worked on for months and was agreed to by House and Senate negotiators on Monday, is expected to be signed by President Trump.

The [Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018](#) makes \$350 million a year available for improving broadband access in rural communities, but Community Connect Grant Program money is limited to areas where service speeds are less than 10 Mbps for downloads and 1 Mbps for uploads. That's a lower broadband standard than the Federal Communications Commission's 25 Mbps for downloads and 3 Mbps for uploads.

One advocate of expanding access said the standards might be reasonable in the abstract, but maybe not in practice. That's because many believe the FCC's maps about people's current access fail to accurately capture speeds at households across the country.

"We're concerned about that because of the inaccuracy of the data and the maps," Deb Socia, executive director of Next Century Cities, told Route Fifty. "Ninety percent of a community could have less than 10 Mbps and still be ineligible for funds; that's a pretty significant number of people."

USDA launched an e-Connectivity pilot project Thursday that will see an additional \$600 million of 2018 omnibus spending money go toward spurring private investment in rural broadband, but that too uses the 10-1 definition.

The farm bill does, however, direct grant funding more toward places with low population densities, while using loans for those with higher densities—a win for rural areas that limits providers' ability to reserve service for more populated communities.

"Existing federal policy has failed to get broadband in rural America," said Jim Matheson, CEO of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

Instead, the farm bill will enable co-ops to both modernize the electric grid and offer retail broadband to consumers, Matheson said. Successful broadband rollouts by co-ops could see more federal funding flow their way in future legislation, he added.

Unfortunately, 20 states still inhibit local communities and, in some cases, co-ops from building out broadband networks, Socia said.

Socia would also like to see more broadband funding for communities where slower digital subscriber line, or DSL, internet service is degrading, but she was pleased to see that the new legislation filled a need for greater precision farming connectivity.

Reliable broadband access in rural America enables precision farming technologies to reduce water, fuel and fertilizer use with the help of sensors and drones.

Moving forward, lawmakers need to be cognizant that attempts to avoid broadband overbuilding may be counterproductive in areas where FCC maps currently overestimate service, Socia said.

“Branding overbuilding as a wasteful thing isn’t really helpful, in part because the data is so bad,” she said. “They have access but we know the map isn’t really accurate, so I don’t think we want to be so bold.”

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