

The ReConnecting Rural America Act

Access to high-speed broadband is not a luxury for rural communities; it is a necessity. Without quality broadband services, workers have fewer opportunities for good-paying jobs; farmers and business owners are isolated from new markets; and health care providers are unable to access the most advanced technologies needed to help their patients.

Established in 2018, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) ReConnect Program provides loans and grants to eligible entities to facilitate broadband deployment in underserved areas of rural America that do not currently have sufficient access to broadband. Since its inception, USDA's ReConnect Program has awarded \$3.13 billion in funding across at least 43 states and territories. Yet, despite these substantial federal investments, many rural Americans are still left on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The 2023 Farm Bill will provide Congress a tremendous opportunity to ensure the USDA has the tools, flexibility, and resources to address the long-term, scalable, broadband buildout needs of rural communities across America. This is a bipartisan issue, which is why **Senator Peter Welch (D-Vt.)**, Chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy, and **Senator Roger Marshall (R-Ks.)** have joined together to introduce the bipartisan *ReConnecting Rural America Act* based on the below shared principles.

Main Policy Goals:

- Allow USDA to make loans, grants, and loan/grant combos
- Establish 100/100 required build out speeds;
- Define unserved threshold as at least 75% unserved at 100/20 (must prioritize awards to areas in which at least 90% of households lack 100/20);
- Include Communications Union Districts;
- Clarify that coordination is conducted at the federal level; and
- Sufficient authorization levels to address the overwhelming demand for the program.

Award Amounts:

- Allow up to 100% grant for Colonias, Persistent Poverty Areas and Socially Vulnerable Communities and meet minimum speeds/thresholds above;
- A loan/grant combo award must be no more than 50% grant;
- Allow up to 100% grant in areas where 90% lack sufficient access of 100/20 and meet minimum speeds/thresholds above;
- Allow combination loan/grants or loans for awardees who meet minimum speeds/thresholds above; and
- Allow loans for awardees who meet the minimum speeds/thresholds for the current Rural Broadband Access Loan Program.

Eligible Award Uses:

- Construction, improvement, and acquisition of equipment and facilities to provide broadband service in rural areas; and
- Pre-application expenses.