

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “From Introduction to Implementation: A BEAD Program Progress Report”

September 10, 2024

For years Democrats and Republicans on this Committee have talked about bringing high speed internet to every community in the nation. Last Congress, Democrats delivered on that promise by passing the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law that invested \$65 billion in broadband, including \$42 billion for the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program. The Biden-Harris Administration has done more to advance our bipartisan goal of universal connectivity than any administration in memory. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has risen to the occasion not only to execute a large and prescriptive broadband program, but also to restore and rehabilitate an agency that was left to wither in the Trump Administration.

This hearing today is important – we should be examining the implementation of the BEAD program, which is going to make a huge difference in communities that have simply been left behind for too long. The BEAD program is wildly popular among Democrats and Republicans and in blue and red states across the nation. We’ve seen enthusiastic public statements about the program from Republican governors like Governors Holcomb of Indiana, Lee of Tennessee, Cox of Utah, and our former Committee colleague, Governor Gianforte of Montana. I’d like to submit these statements for the record.

Those are Republican voices outside of Washington, but unfortunately today we’re likely to hear Committee Republicans criticize the implementation of the BEAD Program. But we cannot, and should not, forget that every Republican member of this Subcommittee voted against the infrastructure bill and the investments it has already started bringing to their states. They will likely complain that the investments are not getting to their states fast enough, but they all voted against the investments in the first place. If Committee Republicans had their way last Congress, these investments would have never become law and would not now be available to their states.

And so today they are going to focus their attention on a low-cost service option that helps to make internet more affordable for American families. They are going to deceptively call this low-cost option rate regulation, which it is not. The law directs NTIA to execute a deliberate process with the states and gives NTIA explicit authority to approve or disapprove what each state proposes for its low cost option. Committee Republicans should not forget that this requirement was enacted on a bipartisan basis and not just created out of thin air by NTIA. And Congress included this requirement because having access to internet service is only meaningful if people can actually afford it.

We are also likely to hear that it's taking too long to start work on the projects being funded. We all want these networks deployed as soon as possible, but the process and timeline is exactly what the law requires and what is needed to get the job done right.

We do not want a repeat of the Republican FCC's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund program, which was rushed in 2020 to try and give then President Trump a favorable talking point on the campaign trail. From the start, it was burdened by waste and plagued by providers defaulting on their commitments to build out networks. This program gave us an invaluable lesson in how *not* to design a broadband program.

As of today, 48 states have had their BEAD program plans approved by NTIA, including my home state of New Jersey, which had its \$263 million plan approved last Friday. Democrats in Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration will not lose sight of our goal to connect every American to high-speed, reliable, and affordable internet.

That will not be the case if President Trump wins in November. The Trump Project 2025 calls for reevaluating the BEAD program to "set fresh priorities." Anyone concerned about how quickly these projects will start connecting Americans should be extremely worried about the delays this would cause.

If we consider what Republicans might impose as "fresh priorities" for BEAD, we can look to ideas they have volunteered over the past two years. This includes gutting the low-cost option and expanding the use of less reliable and soon-to-be-obsolete technology so that consumers' bills go up.

We also can't forget that the Republicans oppose the extension of funding for the Affordable Connectivity Program, which served as a lifeline for more than 23 million households in this country until funding ran out in June.

So as we discuss ensuring that all Americans have access to high-speed internet service, we must continue to fight to make sure that the service is affordable for all American families.

And with that, I yield back the balance of my time.