

Over three years ago, President Bush set forth an ambitious goal of universal, affordable access to broadband technology by 2007. While bold, the goal is necessary and universality is fast becoming a key objective to ensure that geography does not become a barrier to entry in the information economy.

Agriculture has always been at the forefront in the adoption of new technologies. In the 20th Century, tractors, combines, hybrid seed and new tillage methods defined improvements in yield, quality and efficiency. The innovations of the past are fast being eclipsed by those of the future with biotechnology and information services helping to define how farmers and ranchers will be profitable.

While the agriculture sector is an important constituent, rural America also includes small businesses, local governments, health care providers, first responders and residents in our communities. All of these stakeholders have a strong demand for broadband access and it is already clear to policy makers in the United States and around the world that broadband access can help facilitate economic development and civic participation.

The success of the rural electrification and telephone programs over the past 70 years demonstrates the long-term impact of extending utilities that were once thought to be too expensive for rural Americans. The Tennessee Valley Authority is a good example of the impact that extending utility service can have on a single state and region. These experiences are helping foster a new debate how the Federal, state and local governments can help rural America bridge the "digital divide."

Data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicate that the broadband gap between rural and non-rural Americans at work is small, but gaps persist at home. And while rural areas lag their urban counterparts in access, deployment of broadband presents different challenges and obstacles compared to "traditional" utility services.

To help bridge this divide, the 2002 farm bill authorized a loan and loan guarantee program to help ensure that rural consumers benefit from the same quality and range of telecommunications services that are available in urban and suburban communities. Complementing the loan program, the Rural Utilities Service manages the Community Connect grant program targeting broadband service to schools, libraries, education centers, law enforcement and other customers in rural areas. These two programs are part of an overall national effort to help promote connectivity and the roll out of broadband access.

However, as with any new technology or service, there will be occasional problems with its application and program management. The broadband program has been the subject of two recent reports from the Government Accountability Office and Department of Agriculture's Office of Inspector General.

The purpose of this hearing is to engage the Department and key stakeholders in a dialogue. I am eager to listen to how the program is working and what improvements have been made to the management structure since the start of Administrator Andrew's tenure. This is a good opportunity to hear what recommendations were made in both reports, which ones are being implemented and how problems in the beginning years of implementation can be avoided in the

future. These lessons will be critical as we move into reauthorization of the farm bill next year.

We need to recognize that the broadband program is just one part of a more complex puzzle on promoting the deployment of equipment and facilities. New technologies like satellite and wireless systems are redefining how high speed access is delivered to homes and businesses across the country. It is important to note that other Federal agencies like the Department of Commerce, the Federal Communications Commission are key actors in this issue. Together, we can successfully reach the President's goal of universal access and I look forward to working with my colleagues in the Senate to help make this a reality.