

# The National Grange

Of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry

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*Building Communities*

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June 8, 2009

The Honorable Michael J. Copps, Acting Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 Twelfth Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554

**RE: A National Broadband Plan for Our Future, GN Docket No. 09-51**

The National Grange, the nation's oldest general farm and rural public interest organization, applauds the Federal Communications Commission (Commission) for developing a National Broadband Plan. We urge its ultimate adoption. Broadband service has become a critically important component in the daily lives of all Americans, including family farmers and rural residents and small businesses. The Notice of Inquiry is a bold step toward recognizing broadband's value to our nation's future economic prosperity as well as the importance of ensuring that every American, including those in rural areas, has access to advanced telecommunications technologies.

Founded in 1867, the National Grange has more than 2,700 local, county and State Grange grassroots chapters in 40 states. The National Grange was instrumental in the country's successful effort to bring rural mail delivery, electricity and basic telephone service to rural America in the last century. Today, the Grange is fighting for adequate access to modern communications technologies for family farmers and rural Americans as the natural progression to our 140 year history of addressing the real life economic and political needs of family farmers and rural Americans.

The Commission has outlined an ambitious, far-ranging NOI that touches on a plethora of important issues affecting rural Americans. The Commission has also recently released a comprehensive rural broadband strategy report: *Bringing Broadband to Rural America*. The National Grange commends the Commission for releasing this report in conjunction with the NOI so that its findings and conclusions can be incorporated directly into the broader discussion of a National Broadband Plan. The National Grange broadly supports the recommendations contained in *Bringing Broadband to Rural America*, as a starting point for addressing rural broadband issues within the context of a National Broadband Plan, with additional suggestions as noted in these comments.

Rural Americans represent one of the largest groups of Americans who physically do not have the option to subscribe to broadband service. To address the broadband access needs of these unserved rural Americans, it is critically important to first identify whom these individuals, family farmers and small businesses are and where they are located. That is why it is so important that the nation develop detailed maps showing which areas lack broadband access and need deployment. In addition, as noted in Paragraph #61 of

the NOI, mapping the current availability of broadband in remote and rural communities is also crucial to making sure that stimulus funds are used appropriately.

The goal of any effective mapping programs must be to assist rural community leaders to close the digital divide by stimulating adoption of broadband services and promote private, cooperative and public investment in network infrastructure build-out. The National Grange believes that detailed state maps need to be generated on an expedited basis. Federal and state grants should be prioritized to make sure unserved areas are mapped accurately down to the granular level to determine broadband availability along each block and on each road in every rural and tribal community. Successful mapping programs should create accurate, transparent and useful maps that provide support and direction to state and local leaders, broadband providers and interested citizens as well as incorporate a meaningful public feedback loop and third party validation to assess data collection methodology and the effectiveness of data dissemination at the local level.

Public/private partnerships designed to allow competitive broadband providers to share information on coverage areas without having to publicly disclose private business related data or without having to disclose private data about individual subscribers must be promoted and fully funded. The National Grange believes that failure to incorporate strong provisions to protect the legitimate business confidentiality and individual privacy interests of broadband providers, small businesses, family farmers, and consumers will deter rather than promote the goal of universal broadband adoption in unserved rural and tribal communities. Broadband deployment in tens of thousands of urban and suburban communities across the nation has been successfully completed without requiring widespread public disclosure of legitimate confidential business data or private subscriber information. There is no reason that the same expectations of confidentiality and privacy should not apply to rural broadband deployment efforts. Arguments that postulate that a different standard of “full public disclosure” of confidential business and private subscriber information is necessary for successful extension of broadband capacity into unserved rural and tribal communities are eerily reminiscent of claims made by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments around the globe regarding the need for greater government involvement in monitoring and controlling how their citizens access the Internet. With the appropriate level of protection for confidential and private data as well as the strong commitment of state and local governments and local organizations that know the local landscape, the National Grange believes the FCC can reasonably set a goal of completing these maps by the end of 2009.

In some cases, as is generally noted, broadband may be currently available in tribal, rural and remote areas but is not being fully adopted by individuals, small businesses or community institutions in those communities. This may be due to the lack of financial resources, the absence of knowledge of the benefits of broadband access, or both, as highlighted in Paragraphs #52-56 of the NOI. A National Broadband Plan should address plans to provide financial assistance to families and small businesses, where necessary, to educate those who need more knowledge of computing. Educational materials should also be developed concerning the financial benefits of educational and personal services available over the Internet as well as financial incentives to increase direct employment opportunities available over the Internet. Financial support for aggressive technical assistance, education and outreach to deploy and access government services and client

information services by various farming, rural and tribal constituencies that are directly served by state and Federal government programs should also be included.

For the particularly challenging situations of rural Americans facing severe poverty, chronic disabilities or both, the National Grange believes that additional policy responses are justified as part of a comprehensive National Broadband Plan. The National Grange believes that an adequately-funded broadband lifeline pilot program should be incorporated into any comprehensive national broadband Plan as a way to give the Commission the opportunity to test various approaches to subsidize broadband deployment to reach qualified low income, unemployed, aged, disabled and otherwise vulnerable rural households (including households who may have higher-cost equipment needs) as a way to help bridge the digital divide. The broadband lifeline pilot program should be structured and funded sufficiently to maximize its utility as a learning experience, encourage expedited adoption among the targeted communities and encourage participation among competitive broadband service providers across various technology platforms, regardless of whether or not those broadband service providers own facilities or contract for the use of service facilities use with third parties.

Broadband grant and loan programs authorized by the AARA and administered by the USDA's Rural Utility Service and the U. S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to accelerate broadband deployment are two tools that could be use to establish a broadband lifeline pilot program. The National Grange supports these programs urges RUS and NTIA to structure their programs to facilitate the immediate availability of low cost broadband service to low income individuals in unserved and under served rural communities.

The lack of broadband adoption in rural and tribal communities may also be due to a lack of an adequate infrastructure as well as a lack of regulatory and employer support for telecommuting and tele-consulting that would directly generate additional jobs, employment and economic activity in these communities. The National Grange believes that FCC should set an affirmative example, as part of the National Broadband Plan, for the Federal government to help spur the development of remote and rural telecommuting and work opportunities by designating that at least 5% of all FCC technical support contracts must be sourced or outsourced to employees or contractors who will be expected to perform their duties via telecommuting in rural and tribal communities with low broadband adoption rates and/or recent broadband penetration. Further, the National Broadband Plan should, within a four year period, set a goal of requiring broader initiatives by federal and state government agencies to set aside at least 5% of all of their technical support contracts to be outsourced to telecommuting employees or contractors in rural and tribal communities as well.

In addition to funding for better education regarding the active accessing of services and employment opportunities available over the Internet via broadband, the National Grange believes that an effective universal broadband utilization strategy should also specifically encourage and foster greater participation by potential third party beneficiaries (both in the government and private sectors) who have a clear economic interest or defined public mission to serve rural and remote customers in a cost effective manner through the development of passive applications that can be deployed via the Internet and that require minimal direct interface between users and computers. Active involvement of third

parties who provide services to rural customers are likely to be critical in meeting demand aggregation targets for public/private investment in broadband deployment in many rural communities. Examples of potential passive or nominally active Internet based applications that potentially could serve the general rural population in a cost effective manner would be telehealth and long term care management, utility demand management programs, public safety, corrections and offender monitoring, emergency preparedness, administration of general public assistance programs, insurance, and banking. For the farm community, additional examples of potential passive Internet based applications would include: irrigation management; livestock management and disease mitigation, verification for eligibility for federal farm programs, environmental best practices monitoring, and real time verification of value added farm production practices, such as organic or humane animal treatment.

A National Broadband Plan should also address the need for competition in delivering broadband to all Americans. Competition will lead to wider access, lower prices and better service in answer to the inquiry in Paragraph #49 of the NOI. However, in response to Paragraph #48, we need to ensure that the federal, state and local governments do not adopt regulations that would discourage competition and investment by the private sector. As the National Grange has noted in previous correspondence with the Commission, our organization strongly believes that continued investments within the Internet's infrastructure are imperative to deliver rural Americans with a broadband network that rivals those within our nation's cities and suburbs. Therefore, we strongly urge the adoption of a National Broadband Plan that will propel innovation and investment in the broadband industry, and enact policies that will not reverse course in building a better Internet for tomorrow's rural America.

As the Internet increasingly incorporates video and other high bandwidth utilizing technologies, it becomes even more useful to rural Americans and more useful to service providers who need to reach rural customers to provide access to resources that otherwise might not be available in rural or tribal communities. Wal-Mart is an example of a company that developed its successful business plan by aggressively targeting the commercial retail needs of moderate-sized, underserved, rural markets. Wal-Mart currently accounts for approximately 40% of all national DVD sales. The company now e-mails movies directly to their customers, anywhere in the country. It is also estimated that by 2010 there will be a 32% increase in online video viewers – that's an additional 50 million U.S. online video viewers from today, for a total of over 157 million on-line video viewers. A video, high bandwidth, capable Internet puts rural America in touch with the world and guarantees that rural America will be an integral part of the global village. The National Grange welcomes these advances and supports their incorporation into a National Broadband Plan. However, we understand that such progress will demand greater resources and management on the network's backbone.

The National Grange believes that competitive forces should be a driving force in addressing the regulatory oversight challenges of providing high-speed Internet access to Americans in rural and tribal communities. Rural and tribal communities offer too large and too important a market for any competitive provider of Internet based commercial services to ignore. Rural and tribal communities are equally critical areas for Internet based delivery of services by local, state and Federal government agencies. Therefore, the National Grange believes that one-size-fits all, regulatory prohibitions that dictate the

management of the Internet's infrastructure will be counter productive. Specifically, the National Grange believes that maintaining private network management is a key purveyor of the unique and reliable end user expectations in rural and tribal areas. As more and more, rural Americans use broadband to connect with doctors, telecommute, run small businesses, and access the world, heavy bandwidth applications and the arrival of new software streaming across the network, will become the common expectation for rural broadband customers. Internet providers must maintain unmitigated ability to manage that traffic so as to maximize each consumer's experience, regardless of their geographic location.

Restrictive and prescriptive rule-making, such as proposals to adopt so called network neutrality provisions, that attempt to dictate how network management can and cannot occur will likely be an ad hoc, hasty and ill-advised process, that could very quickly become outdated given the ever-changing IP demands on networks and the innovation that is constantly being deployed to manage networks and enhance user experiences. It is also unlikely to take into account the complexities of integrating competitive facilities and platform based technologies (some of which are still in the development stages) that are likely to be needed to provide advanced Internet services to all rural Americans.

The National Grange believes that the any National Broadband Plan's posture towards management practices on the network should remain one of vigilance. The Commission has previously adopted a comprehensive *Internet Policy Statement* that broadly describes the basic rights of internet users to access lawful content, run applications and services, connect devices to the network and enjoy the advantages of competition. The National Grange supports the continued oversight by the Commission to enforcing the principals of the *Internet Policy Statement* as part of the National Broadband Plan. The National Broadband Plan can and should continue to ensure, through investigations and individual proceedings, that Internet providers and applications alike are delivering an optimal experience for all consumers, including those living in rural and tribal communities. The National Broadband Plan should also clearly lay out circumstances related to how instances of individual internet provider network management conduct may affect future individually based regulatory decisions involving those providers, such as proceedings related to mergers and acquisitions. However, the National Broadband Plan should remain focused on the benefits that dynamic network management provides to consumers as whole (and rural and tribal consumers in particular) and not the considerations of any single company, application, technology, platform or device that operates on the network.

The National Grange appreciates the opportunity to comment on the National Broadband Plan. Grange members who live in rural and tribal areas understand how difficult it will be to bring advanced telecommunications services to every community of this vast and diverse country. While broadband may have been a luxury in the past, Grange members understand that access to competitive, high speed broadband service is now essential to the economic sustainability of rural and tribal communities.

Sincerely,

Leroy Watson, Legislative Director  
National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry