

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 16, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Congratulations on your recent confirmation to serve as United States Secretary of Agriculture. I look forward to working with you and your staff at USDA during these unprecedented and difficult times to advance agriculture and rural development. I hope you carefully review comments for the final rule aimed at expanding broadband access in rural communities under the ReConnect Program.

While North Carolina is a rapidly growing state, the ten counties I represent are predominately rural. They have been left in the dark when it comes to accessing broadband. In the 21st century it is impossible to think of life without technology and reliable internet. Unfortunately, there are thousands of school children, workers, farmers, and other residents in my district who are still waiting for internet service. In North Carolina, there are over 500,000 residents who lack either high-speed internet or any internet at all.

Caswell County, which is in my district, serves as a prime example of how severe this problem is in North Carolina. Of the roughly 23,000 residents, nearly 40% lack sufficient internet according to the state Broadband Infrastructure Office and 2010 U.S. Census data. During the pandemic, it has become even more difficult for children to complete homework assignments, small-business owners to conduct meetings, farmers to access information, and nonprofits to communicate with the community. But the issue extends well beyond Caswell County, as I hear the same concerns across the ten counties I represent.

While the USDA ReConnect is truly unique in how it assists communities that often lack resources, there is much room for improvement.

I have heard from community stakeholders that the existing 10/1 mbps threshold for qualification under the ReConnect program has at times made it difficult to service my constituents with inadequate broadband. Specifically, mbps slightly above 10/1 mbps can be woefully insufficient in our increasingly digital world, particularly during the COVID-19 health pandemic. As school, work, and even healthcare have moved significantly online, I would ask that your agency consider raising the 10/1 mbps standard for access to the ReConnect program, and institute periodic review to ensure that the qualifications for the ReConnect program are never so low that they exclude communities with significant needs. As new technologies require increased internet speeds, we cannot let underserved areas fall farther behind.

Finally, could you please speak to what USDA can do—under its existing statutory authority—to incentivize private providers to build out infrastructure in the communities that need it most? Public-private partnership is a bedrock of the delivery of broadband throughout my state's rural communities, and I would greatly appreciate any efforts by your agency to further help private builders meet communities with tremendous need.

The future progress of counties in my district depends on access to high-speed internet. Thank you for your attention to this matter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Ted Budd
Member of Congress