

## Co-ops Connect FYI

By Jonathan Chambers • Mar 28, 2025

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### Is History Going to Repeat Itself for Rural Broadband Access?



In 2010, the FCC produced the National Broadband Plan (NBP), a “comprehensive” roadmap with scores of policy recommendations to ensure every American would have access to broadband.

- The NBP became the basis of the FCC’s reforms to its universal service programs.
- In the decade that followed, nothing was more damaging to rural broadband service than the National Broadband Plan.

#### What does the National Broadband Plan have to do with BEAD?

With BEAD, the Trump Administration is at risk of repeating the mistakes of the Obama Administration.

### Historical Context



The NBP’s goal was to ensure that by 2020, 100 million urban/suburban homes would have access to 100 Mbps downstream internet service (colloquially called “100 squared”).

In 2010, there were 116 million households in the U.S. – approximately 100 million urban/suburban households and 16 million rural households. The NBP 100 squared goal was only for urban/suburban America; the NBP’s goal for rural America was substantially lower – **4 Mbps downstream/1 Mbps upstream (or 4/1 Mbps)**.

**Three points** of note regarding the 2010 landscape when the NBP was published:

- Cable broadband was already available to 100 million urban/suburban households, **and** cable providers were rolling out DOCSIS 3.0 – a new standard that delivered 100 Mbps downstream **without** any government involvement.
- The FCC budgeted \$45 billion over 10 years to achieve the rural 4/1 Mbps standard through its Universal Service High-Cost Fund. The FCC then began spending tens of billions on subsidies to incumbent telecommunications companies using 4/1 Mbps – as opposed to 100 Mbps downstream – as the baseline standard.
- 4/1 Mbps as a standard for rural America was already **two** generations behind when it was adopted; it was **three** generations behind by the time the money was spent.

**Fast-forward 10 years** to 2020, when COVID hit: Rural American households, lacking access to 100 Mbps, were dramatically unprepared to work from home, attend school online, and participate in the economy.

- You can trace the unpreparedness directly back to the NBP’s goals for rural Americans.

#### The bottom line:

With BEAD, there is a risk history will repeat itself, particularly if the term “technological neutrality” is used to justify substandard service for rural America.

- The 100/20 Mbps BEAD standard already is two generations behind.
- By the time BEAD money is spent, 100/20 Mbps will be three generations behind.

### 3 BEAD Improvements to Consider



Yesterday, the Senate Commerce Committee held a confirmation hearing for the new NTIA Administrator, Arielle Roth.

#### My recommendations for Nominee Roth:

I would propose three specific improvements to BEAD for the new NTIA Administrator to consider.

#### 1) The 100/20 Mbps standard should be a *minimum* standard; and, it should be used only if there are no better long-term alternatives.

- BEAD is a long-term investment in rural America.
- There should be a future-proof standard for BEAD that includes any technology capable today of delivering multi-Gigabit performance that will seamlessly evolve over time.
- For any geographic area, if BEAD funding can leverage the construction of future-proof networks such as those already available in urban/suburban areas, that is the right investment in rural America, too.

#### 2) Eliminate rules or regulations that add cost or time to the deployment of rural networks.

- NTIA should reject state programs that adopt climate change resiliency plans, environmental studies, Davis Bacon labor requirements and other costly and time-consuming regulations.
- Redoing a state application process may delay some states on the front end, but it will save considerable time in the long run.

#### 3) Local input should not only be considered; it should be dispositive.

- In my experience, the ones who truly care about getting broadband decisions right are the people affected by decisions, *i.e.*, local officials.
- I would give county councils a leading role in the decisions about how BEAD is spent in their counties, including giving county councils a veto on awards to sub-grantees.
- If county officials does not approve a plan for their county, they should be given the proportionate BEAD allocation for their county to get the job done themselves.

In the coming weeks, I will lay out more specific details about each of these suggestions. I would welcome any ideas you might care to share.

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