

114TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 3152

To amend the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 to establish an Office of Rural Broadband Initiatives in the Department of Agriculture, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JULY 22, 2015

Mr. NOLAN introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on Agriculture, and in addition to the Committee on Energy and Commerce, for a period to be subsequently determined by the Speaker, in each case for consideration of such provisions as fall within the jurisdiction of the committee concerned

A BILL

To amend the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 to establish an Office of Rural Broadband Initiatives in the Department of Agriculture, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Rural Broadband Ini-
5 tiative Act”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 The Congress finds the following:

1 (1) The Rural Electrification Act of 1936
2 helped bring electricity and telephone service to
3 rural America, thus removing major barriers to the
4 development of our rural economies.

5 (2) A lack of affordable broadband presents a
6 similar barrier to the development of our rural econ-
7 omy.

8 (3) According to the Federal Communications
9 Commission, 53 percent of rural Americans lack ac-
10 cess to service delivering broadband speeds of 25
11 Mbps for downloads and 3 Mbps for uploads.

12 (4) High-speed broadband access helps rural
13 communities compete and grow in our digital econ-
14 omy.

15 **SEC. 3. SENSE OF THE CONGRESS.**

16 It is the sense of the Congress that necessary funds
17 should be made available to provide universal and afford-
18 able broadband access to the United States of America
19 with a focus on underserved rural communities.

20 **SEC. 4. OFFICE OF RURAL BROADBAND INITIATIVES.**

21 (a) IN GENERAL.—Title VI of the Rural Electrifica-
22 tion Act of 1936 (7 U.S.C. 950bb et seq.) is amended—

23 (1) by redesignating sections 601 through 603
24 as sections 603 through 605, respectively; and

1 (2) by inserting before section 603 (as so reded-
2 ignated) the following new sections:

3 **“SEC. 601. DEFINITIONS.**

4 “In this title:

5 “(1) OFFICE.—The term ‘Office’ means the Of-
6 fice of Rural Broadband Initiatives established by
7 section 602(a)(1).

8 “(2) UNDER SECRETARY.—The term ‘Under
9 Secretary’ means the Under Secretary for Rural
10 Broadband Initiatives appointed under section
11 602(a)(2).

12 **“SEC. 602. OFFICE OF RURAL BROADBAND INITIATIVES.**

13 “(a) ESTABLISHMENT.—

14 “(1) IN GENERAL.—There is established in the
15 Department of Agriculture an office to be known as
16 the ‘Office of Rural Broadband Initiatives’.

17 “(2) UNDER SECRETARY.—The head of the Of-
18 fice shall be the Under Secretary for Rural
19 Broadband Initiatives, who shall—

20 “(A) be appointed by the President, by and
21 with the advice and consent of the Senate; and

22 “(B) report directly to the Secretary.

23 “(b) RESPONSIBILITIES.—

24 “(1) IN GENERAL.—The Under Secretary
25 shall—

1 “(A) as of the date of enactment of this
2 section, administer all rural broadband-related
3 grant and loan programs previously adminis-
4 tered by the Administrator of the Rural Utili-
5 ties Service, including—

6 “(i) the rural broadband access loan
7 and loan guarantee program established
8 under section 603;

9 “(ii) the Community Connect Grant
10 Program described in subpart A of part
11 1739 of title 7, Code of Federal Regula-
12 tions (or successor regulations); and

13 “(iii) the Telecommunications Infra-
14 structure Loan program established under
15 this Act.

16 “(2) REQUIREMENTS.—The Under Secretary
17 shall—

18 “(A) conduct extensive, nationwide out-
19 reach to rural areas;

20 “(B) foster the development of a com-
21 prehensive rural broadband strategic vision;

22 “(C) plan coordination of Federal re-
23 sources for State, regional, and local govern-
24 ments to assist citizens living and working in
25 rural areas;

1 “(D) assess all relevant technologies (in-
2 cluding WiFi, WIMAX, DSL, cable, satellite,
3 fiber, and broadband over power lines), as the
4 technologies are able to support in whole or in
5 part rural broadband needs and requirements;

6 “(E) serve as a single information source
7 for all rural broadband programs and services
8 administered by Federal agencies, and coordi-
9 nate the activities undertaken under Federal
10 rural broadband programs; and

11 “(F) provide technical assistance to State,
12 regional, and local governments to develop
13 broadband deployment strategies.

14 “(c) COMPREHENSIVE RURAL BROADBAND STRAT-
15 EGY.—

16 “(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 180 days
17 after the appointment of the first Under Secretary,
18 the Under Secretary shall submit to the President
19 and Congress a report describing comprehensive
20 rural broadband strategy that includes—

21 “(A) recommendations—

22 “(i) to promote interagency coordina-
23 tion of Federal agencies in regards to poli-
24 cies, procedures, and targeted resources,

1 and to improve and streamline the policies,
2 programs, and services;

3 “(ii) to coordinate among Federal
4 agencies regarding existing rural broad-
5 band or rural initiatives that could be of
6 value to rural broadband development;

7 “(iii) to address both short- and long-
8 term solutions and needs assessments for a
9 rapid build-out of rural broadband solu-
10 tions and applications for Federal, State,
11 regional, and local government policy mak-
12 ers;

13 “(iv) to identify how specific Federal
14 agency programs and resources can best
15 respond to rural broadband requirements
16 and overcome obstacles that currently im-
17 pede rural broadband deployment; and

18 “(v) to promote successful model de-
19 ployments and appropriate technologies
20 being used in rural areas so that State, re-
21 gional, and local governments can benefit
22 from the cataloging of successes of other
23 State, regional, and local governments; and

1 “(B) a description of goals and timeframes
2 to achieve the strategic plans and visions identi-
3 fied in the report.

4 “(2) UPDATES.—The Under Secretary shall up-
5 date and evaluate the report described in paragraph
6 (1) on an annual basis.

7 “(d) RURAL BROADBAND ADVISORY PANEL.—

8 “(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 60 days
9 after the date of appointment of the first Under Sec-
10 retary, the Under Secretary shall submit to Con-
11 gress a plan to establish a Rural Broadband Advi-
12 sory Panel (referred to in this subsection as the
13 ‘Panel’).

14 “(2) CHAIRPERSON.—The Panel shall be
15 chaired by the Under Secretary or a designee.

16 “(3) MEMBERSHIP.—The Panel shall be com-
17 posed of representatives of—

18 “(A) State government;

19 “(B) local government;

20 “(C) communications equipment vendors
21 (including broadband data service providers);

22 “(D) public utility services;

23 “(E) local exchange carriers;

24 “(F) wireless carriers;

25 “(G) satellite communications services; and

1 “(H) other appropriate public or private
2 sector entities, as determined by the Under Sec-
3 retary.

4 “(4) MEETINGS.—The Panel shall meet not less
5 than 4 times each year.

6 “(5) DUTIES.—The Advisory Panel shall—

7 “(A) assist the Under Secretary in updat-
8 ing the annual report described in subsection
9 (c)(2);

10 “(B) evaluate the effectiveness of all Fed-
11 eral broadband assistance programs and policies
12 aimed at fostering broadband access in rural
13 and underserved areas;

14 “(C) evaluate best practices employed at
15 the State and local government level to foster
16 broadband access in rural and underserved
17 areas; and

18 “(D) cooperate with the Under Secretary
19 in addressing and evaluating issues determined
20 by the Under Secretary to be critical to fos-
21 tering broadband access and connectivity in
22 rural and underserved areas.

23 “(e) WEB-BASED CLEARINGHOUSE.—The Under
24 Secretary shall establish a comprehensive and interactive
25 rural broadband Web-based clearinghouse that describes

1 options, opportunities, resources, successful public-private
2 partnerships, comprehensive funding sources, and tech-
3 nology tutorials for rural broadband, including—

4 “(1) case studies;

5 “(2) descriptions of best practices;

6 “(3) assessments of various technology solu-
7 tions;

8 “(4) feasibility studies;

9 “(5) applications, including telework, telemedi-
10 cine, distance learning, training, homeland security,
11 senior citizen connectivity and program development,
12 and business and economic development;

13 “(6) rural broadband options and policies anal-
14 ysis; and

15 “(7) support for networks among rural commu-
16 nities and economic development agencies.”.

17 (b) CONFORMING AMENDMENTS.—Section 603 of the
18 Rural Electrification Act of 1936 (as so redesignated by
19 subsection (a)(1)) is amended—

20 (1) in subsection (d)(1)(B), by striking “sub-
21 section (k)” and inserting “subsection (l)”;

22 (2) in subsection (j), by striking “Adminis-
23 trator” and inserting “Under Secretary”;

24 (3) by redesignating subsections (k) and (l) as
25 subsections (l) and (m), respectively; and

1 (4) by inserting after subsection (j) the fol-
2 lowing:

3 “(k) RULES REVISION.—

4 “(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 60 days
5 after the date of appointment of the first Under Sec-
6 retary, the Under Secretary shall submit to Con-
7 gress a revision of the rules and qualification criteria
8 for the loan and loan guarantee programs under this
9 section.

10 “(2) REQUIREMENTS.—In preparing the revi-
11 sion, the Under Secretary shall—

12 “(A) emphasize streamlining the applica-
13 tion process and processing time;

14 “(B) ensure that the financial require-
15 ments for applicants do not unduly disqualify
16 applicants that have demonstrated a viable
17 business plan; and

18 “(C) not diminish the mission of the pro-
19 gram to deliver broadband service to under-
20 served rural areas.”.

21 **SEC. 5. SUFFICIENCY OF RESOURCES.**

22 (a) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 60 days after the
23 date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary of Agriculture
24 shall submit to Congress a report describing the resources

1 and staff necessary to carry out this Act and the amend-
2 ments made by this Act.

3 (b) PREPARATION OF REPORT.—The Secretary shall
4 provide the Office of Rural Broadband Initiatives the re-
5 sources and staff necessary to carry out this section.

6 (c) COMPTROLLER GENERAL REVIEW.—

7 (1) IN GENERAL.—The Comptroller General of
8 the United States shall review the report submitted
9 under subsection (a) for validity.

10 (2) REPORT.—Not later than 30 days after the
11 date on which the report is submitted under sub-
12 section (a), the Comptroller General of the United
13 States shall submit to Congress a report containing
14 the findings of the review under paragraph (1).

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