

Rural American Wasn't Invited to the Debate Over Net Neutrality - Because Rural America Still Isn't Online

By Krissy Kasserman - Food and Water Watch

In rural America the internet crawls...and that's if rural households have internet access at all. In some rural places broadband connections simply aren't available, and in many areas the service that does exist is slow and expensive and delivered by the only internet service provider (ISP) available, so there's no competition to drive improvement. The Trump Administration's repeal of net neutrality only exacerbates the monopoly many rural internet service providers have and heightens the lack of access for farmers and rural residents.

And that's a Problem for Rural America.

As of 2016, 39 % of rural communities lacked access to true broadband internet connection with a minimum download speed of 25 Mbps. Compare this to only 4% of urban households. That means more than 10 million households have no access to broadband, and more than 40 million households have only one provider offering a connection with broadband speeds. This monopoly allows rural providers to charge exceedingly high rates for marginal service.

Despite a huge investment in rural broadband infrastructure early in the Obama's presidency, the "digital divide" continues to plague rural areas and it will only be exacerbated by the demise of net neutrality.

The loss of net neutrality will further hinder competition. Service

On the same day Trump's Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to dismantle net neutrality, Trump's USDA announced online delivery of all new farm bill programs. Here's why that is a giant slap in the face for rural America.

providers can now speed up the delivery of content from businesses that are willing to pay, and businesses are more likely to pay for this delivery in urban areas with higher populations densities.

This will result in an increased investments in infrastructure in urban areas - and decreased investments in rural places. And small businesses in rural areas are less likely to be able to pay a premium to market their products to potential customers - meaning they'll lose important online exposure.

A decent broadband connection can be a lifeline for small, isolated rural communities. Access to the internet is vital for growing small businesses, for providing education opportunities for rural students, for accessing medical care that is often that is often unavailable in rural communities and for giving rural residents access to important government services which are increasingly being delivered online.

What other important rural constituency requires access to broadband internet and will be harmed by the repeal of net neutrality? Farmers.

According to a recent USDA study, only 71% of American farms are online. The vast majority of these are connecting through weak or unreliable methods like satellite or mobile hotspots. Only 8% of farms are connected through fiber.

From weather forecasting to product promotion to networking with other growers, broadband internet isn't a luxury -- it's vital.

And on the same day Trump's Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted along party lines to dismantle net neutrality, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced online delivery of all new farm bill programs. A broadband connection was a necessity before, but it's now become a lifeline for rural farmers to access government services like conservation programs.

Whether you're a new farmer applying for a government loan, a disadvantaged or veteran farmer looking for training, or a community food project seeking assistance in addressing food insecurity, if you don't have reliable and affordable high speed internet connection, this policy change coupled with the demise of net neutrality will likely affect your ability to access USDA programs and services.

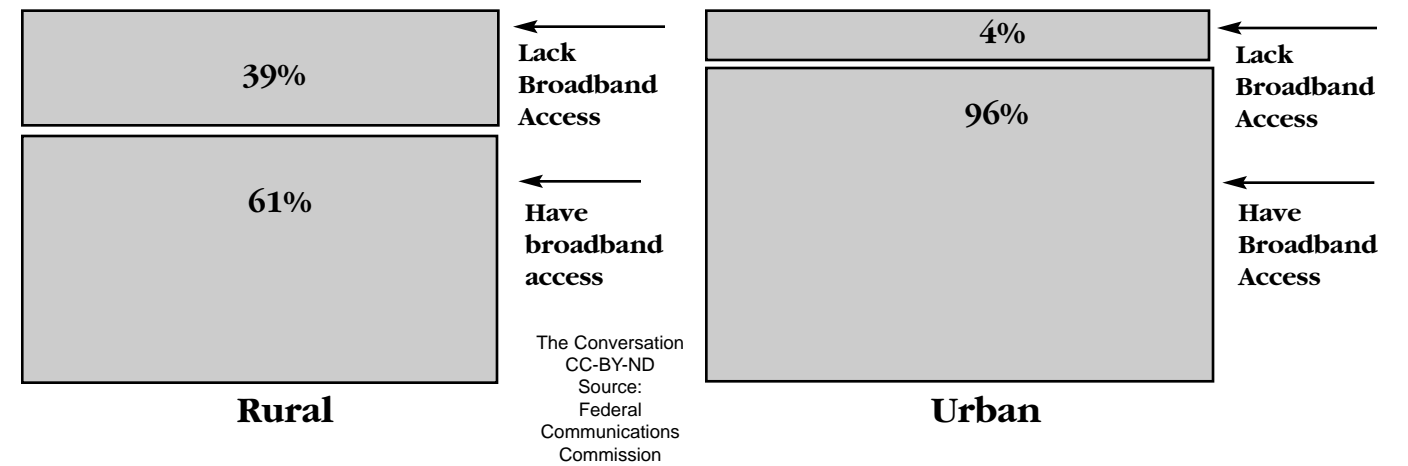
USDA's announcement of online delivery of farm bill programs on the very same day Trump's FCC dismantled net neutrality is a slap in the face of rural residents, farmers and small business owners -- many of whom were among Trump's most important constituencies.

Rural America paved Trump's way to victory, and the repeal of net neutrality is yet another way his policies run counter to their interests. We made a list of other ways Trump's policies negatively impact rural America a few months ago. Sadly that list continues to grow.

In the race of equal access to the internet, rural America hasn't even reach the starting line and the Trump Administration has made clear it had no plans to fix the digital divide.

The Rural Digital Divide in the US

Nearly all URBAN residents have access to true high-speed internet (25 Mbps download/3 Mbps upload), while less than two-thirds of RURAL Americans have the chance to use the internet at speeds like that.



Reaching rural America with broadband internet service.

All across the U.S rural communities' residents are being left out of modern society and 21st century economy with a crucial need still unmet. Rural American want fast, cheaper internet like their city-dwelling compatriots have, letting them work remotely and use online services, to access shopping, news, information and government data.

Source: Sharon Stover, The Conversation January 17, 2018 phys.org/news/2018