



## **H.R. 4374, The Broadband Internet Connections for Rural America Act**

As the nation continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and works to build back better, building out reliable and affordable broadband to ultimately achieve 100% nationwide coverage must be a priority. Achieving that goal will require significant investment in programs that meet the needs of America's rural communities.

The Broadband Internet Connections for Rural America Act invests \$43.2 billion in USDA's Rural Development broadband programs by providing last mile technical and financial assistance to rural communities seeking to improve their broadband service, increasing resources available to build out middle mile, providing grant funding to small rural communities, and providing funds to invest in distance learning and telemedicine capabilities. Overall, these investments provide opportunities for rural communities to invest in the health and well-being of their communities, incentivize business growth, and expand economic opportunities.

The demographics, geography, and landscape of rural communities creates a unique set of barriers to broadband accessibility and adoption in these areas. The Broadband Internet Connections for Rural America Act (BICRAA) addresses those challenges through investment in the Innovative Broadband Advancement Program, directing the Secretary to fund projects in states across the U.S. that demonstrate innovative methods of broadband deployment or technologies that would decrease the cost of broadband deployment and result in faster and higher quality broadband. To address the broad array of barriers rural communities face today, the Secretary would be required to award projects to a diverse range of areas.

The bill consolidates and incorporates the best of ReConnect and the farm bill authorized Rural Broadband Program to create the ReConnect Rural Broadband Program. Since its creation in the Fiscal Year 2018 appropriations bill, ReConnect has delivered over \$900 million<sup>1</sup> to rural areas to build, expand, and improve available broadband services. The Broadband Internet Connections for Rural America Act provides a path forward for both ReConnect and the Rural Broadband Program. The bill provides a timeline and adequate funding to stand up the new ReConnect Rural Broadband Program by Fiscal Year 2023.

Rural communities with few resources, staff, and experience evaluating, operating, or maintaining a broadband network face a substantial barrier in reaching their broadband goals. The Broadband Internet Connections for Rural America Act establishes the Broadband Connectors program to provide a broad range of assistance to these communities such as evaluating their broadband needs, identifying the ideal source of financing, providing guidance with the application process, and assisting in day-to-day management and maintenance of their network. This effort would be modeled after the successful Circuit Rider program utilized for the RUS Waste & Water Program.

Accurate broadband coverage maps are critical to knowing the level of resources needed to meet our goal of 100% broadband coverage nationwide and also to communities that have been inaccurately represented on coverage maps. The Community Broadband Mapping Act provides grants for rural areas to map and provide USDA the location, quality, speed, and affordability of broadband service and infrastructure in an area. The bill further ensures that the data provided by a grantee is verifiable and in compliance with measurement and accuracy standards, and it ensures USDA Rural Development's continued coordination with NTIA and the FCC.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/33RUS2022Notes.pdf>