



BROADBAND ACCESS, ADOPTION & APPLICATION: POLICY CHALLENGES & OPTIONS

Overview

The presence of what many studies have described as a “digital divide” between rural and urban areas of the U.S. has prompted policymakers, private, and nonprofit sectors to seek the expansion of broadband into rural America. The belief is that broadband access can create an even playing field between rural communities and businesses and their urban-based counterparts. Some evidence suggests that improved access to broadband, coupled with the appropriate adoption of this important innovation, can translate into more profits for rural and farm-related businesses and spur improvements in the economic health of rural areas.

A host of national initiatives are now underway that are designed to accelerate the penetration of broadband into areas with limited or no access to high-speed Internet services. These include the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP) and Community Connect Grant Program of the USDA Rural Utilities Service, and the FCC’s Connect America Fund.

In light of the significant national interest and investment being made in broadband expansion into rural America, it is essential to examine policy and program options that can spur the growth of broadband access and use by rural people, farm/nonfarm enterprises, and places. This call for proposals is intended to produce a white paper that responds to a variety of important questions, such as the following:

1. What is the nature and extent of the digital divide across geographic space (such as metro/nonmetro counties or urban/suburban/rural places)? How, and to what extent, has this digital gap shifted over time?
2. What factors strengthen or impede broadband adoption by rural households, businesses, and communities?
3. Are federal investments likely to strengthen Internet use and access by people and places located in historically unserved/underserved areas of rural America? What factors are likely to determine the rate of broadband uptake in these unserved/underserved geographic areas?
4. Does broadband access contribute to the economic health of rural areas, including growth of creative/knowledge-based workers, firms, or entrepreneurial activities?
5. What important policy options or refinements might be needed to expand broadband access, adoption, and use in rural America, especially in areas classified as unserved and underserved?

Applicants are urged to consider these questions and to submit a proposal that seeks to shed light on these and other broadband-related questions relevant to this call for proposal. Drawing upon the current social sciences-based research literature will be essential.

Deliverables

The following preliminary outputs are expected by November 1, 2012:

- A white paper that includes a comprehensive contemporary review and synthesis of the appropriate literature and an articulation of key policy issues, options, challenges, and consequences related to broadband access, adoption, and use in rural America.
- Policy brief (a 1-2 page summary based on the white paper)

Subsequent to successful peer review and refinements to the first two outputs (in response to issues outlined by the peer reviewers), the study author(s) will take part in the following NARDeP-sponsored events to be scheduled in spring 2013:

- Webinar that is open to the public
- Presentation at a public venue to be determined by NARDeP (travel costs to be reimbursed outside the contract)

Application Guide

Single or multiple investigator proposals are welcome. First preference will be given to individuals with demonstrated expertise in broadband and agriculture/rural policy. For-profit entities may apply provided they can demonstrate no conflict of interest in any proposed policy changes.

The funding mechanism will be a personal services contract with the individuals executing the work. The budget is limited to personal services at a daily rate for a maximum of \$15,000 (no indirect costs, travel, printing, telephone or other types of expenses are allowed). The budget should include only the estimated days committed for each team member, each team member's daily rate, and a total award request. Authors of winning proposals must be prepared to provide evidence of recent compensation rates to justify their daily rate, which must also conform to US Office of Management and Budget rate of pay guidelines.

To apply, please send a full curriculum vita, budget, and a 2-3 page plan of work as ONE pdf file to Dr. Bo Beaulieu at ljb@srdc.msstate.edu by August 17, 2012. The subject line of the email should read *Broadband Quote*. Questions about the call for proposals should be submitted to the same email address.

About the NARDeP

The National Agricultural and Rural Development Policy Center is a newly created initiative, funded by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and jointly managed by the four Regional Rural Development Centers. The purpose of the NARDeP Center is to provide timely and unbiased information on agriculture and rural development issues to policy makers. Policy papers will be posted on the NARDeP website and webinars will be advertised to a national audience.