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Legislators See ‘Underserved’ Definition as First Step for Broadband Stimulus

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WASHINGTON, April 5, 2009 - Proper oversight of the \$7.2 billion Broadband Technology Opportunities Program can only take place if key terms are defined properly, a panel of agency officials and policy experts told a congressional committee on Thursday.

The broadband stimulus programs can succeed only if the eventual definition of “unserved areas” is “sensible,” said Rep. Rick Boucher, D-Va., chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet.

Boucher is concerned that areas that have a “smattering” of broadband service might be excluded from the definition of “unserved” areas. Agencies must also exercise care when defining what constitutes an “underserved” area in order to maximize market competition, Boucher said.

“Underserved” should also encompass areas with low available speeds, Boucher said.

But Boucher cautioned that the stimulus program should not be confused with a national broadband strategy, which the Federal Communications Commission is tasked with designing. The FCC is scheduled to take up the task at its April 8 meeting.

Such a strategy could include expanding universal service fund support to include broadband, he said, and indicated his subcommittee would continue to be “actively involved in looking at ways to achieve universal broadband deployment.”

Ranking member Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., said that focusing first only on unserved areas would prevent “another wasteful government program,” and worried that distributing funds without a national broadband map in place would lead to a “ready, fire, aim” approach that would only encourage waste, fraud and abuse.

Stearns suggested first distributing funds to states that have already begun mapping efforts. “It’s common sense that we should know where to best spend the money before the money is actually spent,” he said.

But full committee chairman Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., disagreed with Stearns’ “re-characterization” of the stimulus bill’s requirements.

Waxman noted that the committee had rejected an amendment codifying Stearns’ presumption of priorities into law when it considered the bill in February.” I expect that NTIA will not be distracted by these efforts,” Waxman said.

Developing definitions and a national broadband plan is the FCC’s “most important responsibility since implementing the 1996 Telecom Act,” said Scott Deutchman, acting senior legal advisor to acting FCC Chairman Michael Copps.

But the most important task in developing the plan will be to make sure broadband is available to all Americans, “whether you are rich or poor, live in a rural or urban area or on tribal lands, have a disability, are a small business, are a senior citizen or a high school student,” Deutchman said.

California Public Utility Commissioner Rachelle Chong agreed that mapping should be a prerequisite for receiving broadband grants. Chong noted that California’s program mandated that carriers provide mapping entities with “granular” data down to the street address level. Public-private partnerships could be a successful vehicle for mapping, but only if conducted through a trusted, neutral third party, Chong said.

Such partnerships can be successful in stimulating the “demand side” of the broadband economy, said One Economy Corporation Vice President Nicol Turner-Lee – but only if they are “intentional” in creating a “culture of use” among low-income communities that have the lowest adoption rates for broadband services in the nation.

“If the allocation of broadband stimulus funding does not make a considerable difference among this demographic, we have failed,” said Turner-Lee.

Also testifying during the hearing were Jonathan Large, Dan River District Supervisor in Ararat, Virginia; Brian Mefford, CEO of Connected Nation; Mark Seifert, senior policy advisor, National Telecommunications and Information Administration; and David Villano, assistant administrator of telecom programs at the Agriculture Department.