



Broadband Maps a Necessary Component of Stimulus Grants, Says Stearns

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WASHINGTON, July 17, 2009 – The House Subcommittee on Communications will hold a hearing “in the near future” on making broadband maps a necessary component of awarding Broadband Initiatives Program and Broadband Technological Opportunities Program grants, subcommittee ranking member Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., said Thursday.

Stearns, the luncheon speaker at an Alcatel-Lucent workshop on rural broadband public-private partnerships, is the top Republican on the House Energy and Commerce panel.

At the event, French telecommunications representatives spoke on their experiences in bringing broadband to rural territories throughout France.

Stearns said he was concerned that the stimulus was rushed, and called for more congressional oversight of the broadband stimulus programs.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the Rural Utilities Services and the Federal Communications Commission are in danger of “throwing money indiscriminately around,” he said.

“Broadband is a transformational infrastructure, and can provide a long-term economic boost to the country,” said Stearns. “But the stimulus package was put together in haste. Many are unsure how some agencies would distribute money.”

To that end, he reiterated the three principles that these grantmaking agencies must follow which he initially called for in past hearings.

First, Stearns said that these agencies must create a comprehensive, nationwide broadband map in order to identify areas that need broadband infrastructure, and to prioritize funding in states that already have a map.

Second, they must focus on getting funding to unserved areas before underserved areas.

Finally, they must allocate funds based on whether the project would remain sustainable after the program ended.

There are already provisions for a nationwide map: the Broadband Data Improvement Act, as included in the Recovery Act, provides for grants to states and non-profit organizations to collaborate in making a national broadband map.

All grant awardees, however, must complete broadband data improvement projects by March 1, 2010, which is after many of the grants made by the NTIA and RUS have been distributed.

Stearns acknowledged that next spring was too soon for a nationwide broadband map to be created.

Therefore, he said he hoped that the hearing would “prevent waste” by enforcing these principles in the grantmaking process.

The recent Notice of Funds Availability outlining the application process for RUS BIP and BTOP grants, did not include specific references to utilizing state or national broadband maps.

On other aspects of that NoFA, Stearns praised the NTIA’s and RUS’s commitment to technological neutrality and reasonable cost per household for broadband deployment.

However, Stearns pointed out that the portions of the NOFA referring to network neutrality, nondiscrimination policies and connectivity were “overly broad.”

As of now, Stearns said, the hearing had not been scheduled yet. “Currently I’m talking to Subcommittee Chairman [Rick] Boucher, [D-Va.]” he said, noting that the subcommittee was currently focused on the Satellite Home Viewer Act and a major privacy bill.

“But the sooner we do this, the better,” said Stearns. “The sooner we have the three principles in place, the better.”