



## **Groups Call for US National Broadband Policy**

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The U.S. Congress must set goals for broadband rollout and speed, and increase financial incentives for broadband providers to expand and improve their networks, witnesses at a U.S. Senate hearing said Tuesday.

The U.S. trails behind several countries in both average broadband speed and broadband adoption, and the U.S. needs a national policy focused on increasing both those numbers, said Larry Cohen, president of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) labor union. The average download speed in the U.S. is 2.4 megabits per second, while the average in Japan is 63.6 megabits per second, according to a CWA survey released in August.

"This is not an accident that this happened in Japan," Cohen told the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. "That was the focus of their public policy."

The U.S. is the only industrialized country in the world that doesn't have an extensive broadband rollout policy, Cohen said.

Cohen and other witnesses didn't offer a lot of specific ideas for a national broadband policy, but a common suggestion was to refocus the U.S. Federal Communications Commission's Universal Service Fund more on broadband than on telephone service. The fund, with an annual budget of about US\$7 billion, collects taxes on telecom service and uses about two-thirds of that money to subsidize telephone service to rural areas. "Dial tone doesn't need that kind of funding any more," Cohen said.

Several witnesses offered support for the Broadband Data Improvement Act, a bill that would take several steps to improve data collection about broadband services across the U.S. "We don't even map out in our country where we stand on broadband," Cohen said. "Step one is we need to know where we stand."

The full Senate hasn't voted on the act, which was introduced in May 2007.

Rey Ramsey, chairman and CEO of One Economy, a nonprofit organization focused on bringing technology to low-income people, called on Congress to set broadband goals for the U.S. that don't exist in policy today. The government needs to also focus on broadband applications, such as telemedicine and distance learning, that will drive broadband adoption and private investment, he said.

"We are falling behind," he said. "We're not doing enough in applications."

Ramsey endorsed a Senate broadband resolution, offered in May 2007 by Senator Jay Rockefeller, a West Virginia Democrat. The resolution sets the goal of having 100 megabits per second of broadband service available across the U.S. by 2015.

Senators offered little pushback on the witnesses' calls for a national broadband policy. However, some conservatives, broadband providers and free-market think tanks have questioned broadband statistics showing the U.S. is behind several other industrialized nations in broadband adoption.

In addition, cost and speed comparisons aren't always accurate, Link Hoewing, Verizon's assistant vice president of Internet and technology issues, wrote on the Verizon policy blog last week.

"Many of the charts and comparisons I've seen ... appear to compare actual delivered U.S. speeds with advertised speeds in other countries," Hoewing wrote. "For example, in delving down into the Japanese numbers, which is often cited as among the fastest countries in world when it comes to broadband speeds, you find that roughly half of all Japanese broadband connections are not fiber but rather [much slower] DSL."

But witnesses at Tuesday's hearing suggested that faster broadband will bring huge benefits to U.S. residents and businesses. A growing number of U.S. residents are using broadband for telemedicine, and more residents could take advantage of telemedicine if broadband was more widely available at faster speeds, said Jonathan Linkous, executive director of the American Telemedicine Association.

Linkous said his sister, living in a rural area outside Washington, D.C., has breast cancer, and her broadband connection provides online support and health care information, and even allows her to have groceries delivered. "Broadband is my sister's lifeline," he said.