

Feds: \$401M will add high-speed internet to rural US places

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Carl Roath, left, a worker with the Mason County (Wash.) Public Utility District, pulls fiber optic cable off of a spool, as he works with a team to install broadband internet service to homes in a rural area surrounding Lake Christine near Belfair, Wash., on Aug. 4, 2021. Federal officials announced plans Thursday, July 28, 2022, to spend \$401 million in grants and loans to expand the reach and improve the speed of internet for rural residents, tribes and businesses in 11 West and Central U.S. states. Credit: AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File

The federal government is pledging \$401 million in grants and loans to expand the reach and improve the speed of internet for rural residents, tribes and businesses in remote parts of 11 states from Alaska to Arkansas.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told reporters Wednesday, ahead of the Thursday announcement, that farmers, store owners, schoolchildren and people seeking telehealth medical checkups will benefit from the ReConnect and Telecommunications Infrastructure Loan and Loan Guarantee programs.

"Connectivity is critical to economic success in rural America," Vilsack said in a statement tallying the number of people who could be helped at about 31,000 in states also including Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, North Dakota and Texas.

The statement said the Department of Agriculture plans more spending on high-speed internet in coming weeks as part of a \$65 billion Biden administration plan to expand affordable, high-speed internet to all communities in the U.S.

U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto joined Vilsack and Mitch Landrieu, White House infrastructure coordinator, to point to the effect the grants and loans are expected to have in the northern Nevada community of Lovelock, home to fewer than 2,000 people, and the Lovelock Indian Colony.

"There is a need for this connectivity on so many levels," Cortez Masto said, "whether it brings telehealth, telemedicine, e-learning, workforce development. A connection is so important for so many Nevadans."

Internet provider Uprise LLC will receive more than \$27 million to connect almost 4,900 people, 130 businesses, 22 farms and seven public

schools in Lovelock and surrounding Pershing County, officials said.

Cortez Masto, a Democrat seeking reelection in November, said federal funds will offer eligible Nevada residents a \$30-per-month discount on their internet bill discount and up to \$100 toward a computer.

Elsewhere, Midvale Telephone Co. will get \$10.6 million to bring high-speed fiber-optic internet to people, businesses and farms in four central Idaho counties—Elmore, Blaine, Custer and Boise—and five southeast Arizona counties: Gila, Graham, Pinal, Cochise and Pima.

The Arkansas Telephone Co. will receive \$12 million to connect almost 1,000 people, 10 businesses and 145 farms to high-speed internet in Searcy and Van Buren counties, with low-cost with voice and voice/data starter packages.

Alaska Power & Telephone, Unicom Inc. and Cordova Telephone Cooperative, combined, are slated to receive almost \$55.4 million in to connect almost 3,300 people, 118 businesses and seven schools in remote areas by fiber-optic network.

In New Mexico, Continental Divide Electric Cooperative and ENMP Telephone Cooperative are due to receive a combined \$18 million in grants to install affordable fiber networks, and Penasco Valley Telephone Cooperative will get a nearly \$29 million loan to connect "socially vulnerable communities" in Chaves, Eddy, Lincoln and Otero counties.

Vilsack said the programs will particularly help residents in what he called "persistent poverty counties," where he said most have access to broadband, but about one in three don't have high-speed networks needed for telemedicine and distance learning.

He said the goal was "to do what is necessary to make sure every rural resident, regardless of ZIP code has access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet."

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