



Policy Resolution 2026-08

Broadband Connectivity

A. BACKGROUND

High-speed internet, commonly referred to as “broadband,” is the critical infrastructure of the 21st century and a modern-day necessity for businesses, individuals, schools, and government. Many rural and tribal western communities lack the business case for private broadband investment because of the high cost of infrastructure and the low number of customers in potential service areas. Factors such as the vast distances between these communities, challenging terrain, sparse middle mile and long-haul fiber-optic cable, and the need to permit and site infrastructure across federal, state, territorial, tribal, and private lands make planning, building, and maintaining broadband infrastructure especially difficult. This has left many rural businesses and citizens at a competitive disadvantage compared to urban and suburban areas with robust broadband access.

Historically, federal broadband investment has struggled to address these inequities, due in part to inaccurate and overstated data. Whether or not an area is considered “served” depends not only on if households have access to the internet, but also the speeds that they have access to. This determination has significant effects on a community’s eligibility for federal broadband infrastructure support and can prevent businesses, local governments, and other entities from applying for and securing federal funds to assist underserved or unserved communities. High-quality data is required to ensure that current public broadband deployment efforts are cost-effective and prioritize these areas, while digital opportunity efforts are needed to provide access to affordable broadband and devices and to build the digital skills to utilize broadband.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors support the action of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to increase the definition of broadband to speeds of 100/20 Mbps to support the data, voice, and video demands of many business, education, and health care applications. We support efforts to adopt a higher, scalable, and consistent standard across federal broadband programs, at least 100/20 Mbps and scalable to at least 100 Mbps symmetrical, and 1000 Gbps per 1,000 students and staff speeds that more accurately reflect modern innovations and bandwidth demands.
2. Western Governors request that FCC, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and other federal entities prioritize investments in scalable broadband infrastructure and hardware that meet communities’ increased bandwidth demands into the future. Funds for equipment maintenance, networking hardware, maintenance, and upgrades ensure that fiber optic infrastructure operates at necessary speeds to provide high-quality service.
3. While Western Governors are heartened by significant federal investments in broadband, principally the \$42.5 billion Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program established through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), it is imperative that

federal program design and implementation do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Federal funding represents a historic opportunity to close the digital divide and should help states, territories, and tribal nations reach areas in most need of assistance without duplicating funding. Western Governors urge FCC, NTIA, USDA, and other federal agencies involved in broadband deployment to work closely with Governors and state and territorial broadband offices and respond to and address their needs and concerns before announcing funding opportunities. Western Governors emphasize the need for consistent communication channels and timely responses from federal agencies, especially NTIA. Federal agencies that make independent broadband infrastructure awards should consult with other federal funding agencies, states, and territories prior to finalizing awards to ensure they align with state and territorial BEAD plans.

4. Due to their unique characteristics, western states and territories have a disproportionate amount of high-cost areas to serve. Federal funding and allocation formulas should reflect the exorbitant costs and challenges, from topography to permitting on federal lands, that the West faces when deploying broadband so that states and territories receive adequate funding to connect hard-to-reach households.
5. FCC should recognize state and territorial institutional knowledge about broadband needs and ensure that they have a significant role in data collection, verification, and mapping. FCC should also make map challenge processes transparent and give states and territories ample time and resources to participate in these processes on a regular basis.
6. Western Governors note that state and federal programs under the 1996 Telecommunications Act rightly anticipated a permanent need for communications support given continuously changing technology standards and consumer demand. We urge continued federal commitment to address future gaps in access to broadband and communications services. We encourage Congress to modernize and strengthen the federal Universal Service Fund, which has been a lifeline for communities, schools, and health care facilities across the West.
7. Western Governors note that Congress and federal agencies should strengthen coordination across broadband programs and provide states, territories, and tribes with greater flexibility to implement federal funding in ways that reflect local conditions. This includes establishing clear processes to recover and redeploy funds from prior programs with high default rates. Governors also recommend allowing states and tribes to use both deployment and non-deployment resources to address remaining coverage gaps. In addition, Governors encourage consideration of targeted deadline extensions to support the completion of broadband projects already underway.
8. Western Governors encourage NTIA to allow states and territories to exercise greater flexibility in how remaining BEAD funds are used so states and territories can address their own unique needs, fill gaps, and support programs to expand broadband access.
9. Western Governors recognize the challenges of meeting broadband deployment requirements tied to federal grant programs. Broadband funding agencies should prioritize the re-award of funding at the state and territorial level, a policy that will give communities greater flexibility to pursue new solutions in response to Notices of Funding Opportunity,

meet required state match obligations, and redirect capital to evolving state and local broadband needs.

10. Streamlining permitting and environmental review processes is critical for western states, territories, and partners to meet federal funding deadlines. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to pursue strategies to prioritize reviews, establish a timeframe in which the Department of the Interior must formally accept permits, allow for electronic signatures, expand the use of categorical exclusions, exempt broadband projects when deployment occurs in previously disturbed federal rights-of-way, and explore opportunities to streamline environmental and historic preservation reviews. We support efforts to reduce permitting timelines for broadband infrastructure co-located with existing structures and other linear infrastructure, such as roads, utility poles, and pipelines. Further, Governors urge federal land management agencies to allocate sufficient funding for permitting staff, technical solutions, and programmatic efficiencies.
11. Regulations affecting broadband infrastructure permitting and siting vary by state and can create additional obstacles to private and public investment. Where possible, Western Governors should work together to minimize this barrier.
12. Western Governors encourage Congress and federal agencies to address application barriers for businesses, local governments, cooperatives, tribes, and other entities involved with broadband deployment in rural communities. Where possible, Congress and federal agencies should provide technical assistance, match flexibility, and simplified applications to applicants with limited resources. The Governors have highlighted substantive policy recommendations related to these barriers in our rural development policy resolution. Western Governors are also committed to sharing best practices on how to collaborate with organizations, localities, and tribes in our states and territories, and establishing a strategy among these partners on applying for federal broadband programs to enhance success and reduce competition for funds.
13. Western Governors appreciate USDA and FCC efforts to promote on-farm connectivity and the growth of the precision agriculture sector, which reduces water and pesticide usage and increases productivity. We request that Congress provide additional funding to support the adoption of precision agriculture and extend connectivity from the home to the field and encourage both agencies to engage with Governors' offices, state and territorial broadband representatives, and state departments of agriculture as they pursue policy and program initiatives to support this technology.
14. Many western states have awarded BEAD funds to fixed wireless providers pursuant to NTIA's June 6, 2025, Policy Notice. These awards heavily rely on spectrum to deliver rural connectivity, including the Citizens Broadband Radio Service (CBRS) spectrum band. Western Governors recommend that FCC allocate adequate wireless spectrum to support rural residential connectivity and advanced and emerging agricultural technologies.
15. Western Governors emphasize the growing importance of internet exchange points (IXPs) in promoting cost-effective, reliable broadband service in rural areas. We encourage Congress and federal agencies to promote investment in rural IXPs via applicable broadband deployment programs, legislative proposals addressing infrastructure, and other methods.

16. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to continue expanding the eligibility of electric and telephone cooperatives to pursue USDA and FCC broadband deployment program support. Leveling the playing field for cooperatives and other non-traditional internet providers, including public utilities, ensures that communities in the West can find the broadband solution that meets local conditions.
17. Western Governors urge federal agencies and Congress to expand policy, programmatic, and fiscal opportunities to improve broadband connectivity on tribal lands. This includes designing federal programs in a way that recognizes tribal sovereignty and encourages partnerships between tribes, states, and various broadband providers. We recommend that federal broadband programs allocate a designated portion of their available funding to supporting projects on tribal lands.
18. Federal agencies must ensure consistent consultation and communication across broadband programs affecting tribal communities, including through direct engagement with tribes before and during program changes and funding decisions.
19. Western Governors encourage Congress and federal agencies to support connectivity efforts to community anchor institutions in rural communities to strengthen middle mile networks. We support efforts to advance “to and through” policies that provide flexibility to incentivize additional private or public broadband infrastructure investment beyond connected community anchor institutions.
20. Western Governors appreciate USDA Rural Development’s efforts to promote broadband connectivity across the rural West and responsiveness to our recommendations. We encourage Congress to formally authorize the Rural eConnectivity Program, otherwise known as the ReConnect Program. USDA should consult with state and territorial broadband offices prior to making awards to ensure coordination with state and territorial broadband infrastructure deployment plans.
21. Western Governors support efforts to promote flexibility within the FCC E-Rate Program to deliver home connectivity solutions for unserved and underserved students. We encourage FCC to support hotspot lending programs and other creative efforts that seek to address the homework gap.
22. Western Governors recognize the importance of ensuring that individuals and communities have the skills, technology, and capacity to reap the benefits of our digital economy. As we make historic investments in infrastructure, Western Governors also support complementary investments in digital skills and opportunities, online security, and basic cyber safety and security, especially as AI becomes more prevalent.
23. Notwithstanding the many federal, state, and territorial initiatives to date to bring better connectivity to communities, internet affordability remains the largest barrier to closing the digital divide. Over 16 million households have access to the internet but cannot afford to connect to it. The success of the Affordable Connectivity Program, which quickly grew to connect nearly 1 in 6 households across the U.S., shows the appetite for a solution. Western Governors call on Congress to find permanent funding for a national internet affordability program without which future infrastructure projects may be underutilized.

24. State broadband offices currently face significant capacity constraints. To make the most of federal investments, maximize dollars, and achieve the best results, the federal government must support building capacity at the state and territorial levels. Targeted support, technical assistance, and administrative flexibility would strengthen program implementation and delivery.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of this resolution.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

This resolution will expire in June 2029. Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a semiannual basis. Please consult <http://www.westgov.org/resolutions> for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.