



Minnesota Rural Electric Association



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Senator Torrey Westrom

May 5, 2022

Representative Mike Sundin

Members of the HF4366/SF4019 Omnibus Agriculture, Housing and Broadband
Bill Conference Committee

RE: MREA Recommendations on Broadband Policy and Funding

Dear Senator Westrom, Representative Sundin and members of the
conference committee,

The Minnesota Rural Electric Association (MREA) is the statewide association representing the interests of all 50 of Minnesota's non-profit rural electric cooperatives – which are owned by their members, governed by their members, and operate solely for the benefit of their 1.7 million members around the state and the communities in which they live.

As non-profit and community owned entities, we are uniquely suited to support rural access to the essential service of broadband. Many of Minnesota's rural electric cooperatives are already providing broadband access to unserved and underserved areas of the state, responding to the needs of their rural communities. Electric co-ops support providing adequate funding to ensure high quality broadband everywhere in the state.

Thus, our top priority for this conference committee is to support the Senate provision allocating the state's remaining \$110.7 million of the American Rescue Plan Act's Capital Projects Fund to the Border to Border grant program, and to dedicate expected federal broadband funding to the Border to Border program. This amount is an important down payment on the estimated \$1.3 billion that it will take for all Minnesotans to have the high-quality broadband they need and deserve. We were disappointed that the House reduced its commitment to rural broadband from \$100 million to \$25 million, and urge the conference committee to adopt the Senate position.

To help guide you in your decisions, we write to share our recommendations on the broadband policy and funding components of the Omnibus

Agriculture, Housing and Broadband legislation. For the committee's convenience, we provide page and line references to the revisor's side-by-side that was prepared for the committee.

Provision	MREA Position	Page and Line
Office of Broadband Development legislative report	We support the requirement to have OBD provide a legislative report on Border to Border grants.	R1, House side, 96.9 to 96.15
Grant deadline for 2021 appropriation	We support a deadline to have all Border to Border funds appropriated in 2021 to be spent by end of 2026. We need to get these funds out into the field.	R1-R2, Senate side, 25.26 to 26.14
Lower population density pilot program	Areas of the state with lower population density are more costly to serve. We appreciate that both bodies address this issue, and we prefer the Senate's approach.	R2-R3, Senate side, 26.15 to 26.26
Border to Border appropriation	Our top priority for this conference committee is to support the Senate provision allocating the state's remaining \$110.7 million of the American Rescue Plan Act's Capital Projects Fund to the Border-to Border Grant Program, and to dedicate expected federal broadband funding to the Border to Border program.	R3, Senate side, 26.28 to 27.30
Broadband mapping	We support the appropriation to ensure high quality maps to guide OBD grant decisions.	R3, Senate side, 28.1 to 28.6

Provision	MREA Position	Page and Line
Line extension program	<p>We oppose establishing this program at this time. The complete and total focus of the OBD should be on ramping up Border to Border grants, providing high quality broadband to the most Minnesotans possible. This new program would divert scarce funds away from this focus, at a time when the leadership of the OBD is uncertain.</p> <p>We think that the Minnesota Broadband Task Force should be asked to develop recommendations for an appropriate program structure for a line extension program and time for its implementation.</p>	R3-R6, Senate side, 40.22 to 43.3
Broadband easements	We support providing broadband providers the ability to use their existing easements for the provision of broadband service.	R6–R8, Senate side, 43.4 to 46.3

Thank you for the opportunity to our broadband recommendations, and for all your work on behalf of Minnesotans. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

s/Mike Bull

Mike Bull, Director
 Policy and Regulatory Affairs
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