United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 11, 2016

The Honorable Tom Wheeler, Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

As representatives of states with significant agricultural activity, we share the goal of ensuring that access to high-quality communications networks in rural America remains a top priority for the Commission.

More than ever before, U.S. farmers and ranchers are demanding reliable, high-speed mobile broadband services. Mobility is essential for new precision agriculture technologies to deliver productivity gains and environmental sustainability. These technologies are transforming U.S. agriculture as American farmers and ranchers seek to feed, fuel, and clothe an ever-increasing global population using limited land, water, and other resources.

We applaud the Commission's recent decision to allow rate-of-return carriers to access support for "standalone" broadband facilities. This step will help encourage carriers to deploy modern broadband-capable wireline networks in rural areas. Importantly, this is necessary as consumers increasingly rely on wireless services and are "cutting the cord" to shift away from wireline voice, and soaring mobile broadband relies on sufficient backhaul, often provided by these wireline networks. Going forward, sufficient support must also be available to preserve and expand mobile voice and broadband.

Significant work remains to ensure that broadband services are available in rural America and reasonably comparable to services enjoyed in urban areas. Simply stated, broadband, particularly high-speed mobile broadband, is not readily available in many rural areas or could be at risk absent the right policies and support through the Universal Service Fund (USF). While progress has been made in the deployment of broadband, significant portions of rural areas have been left behind. According to the FCC, 87 percent of rural Americans (52.2 million) lack access to mobile broadband with minimum advertised speeds of 10 Mbps/1 Mbps, compared to 45 percent of those living in urban areas.

Without the certainty that essential mobile broadband infrastructure will be deployed and maintained, investments in agricultural productivity will be delayed or bypassed altogether, and the potential efficiencies and benefits to rural communities will be lost. The extension of high-speed mobile and backhaul facilities to agricultural croplands and ranch lands must keep pace

with the ongoing deployment of technology in the field. Increasing numbers of modems in the field means a growing demand for connectivity in the areas in which they operate.

The expansion of rural broadband should be a top priority of federal and state policymakers, as expanded deployment in rural areas will address important economic, educational, health care, and public safety goals. Ongoing USF reform can provide a mechanism for enabling mobile broadband access in rural communities where "people live, work, and travel" that is truly comparable to broadband services provided in urban and suburban areas. To accomplish this goal, USF should support mobile broadband at a minimum of today's level to close the coverage gap while preserving existing service.

In this regard, we ask you to give special attention as you work to establish Phase II of the USF's Mobility Fund (MF). Given the importance of mobile services today, the MF should be retained and updated to ensure that funding will promote new mobile broadband deployment in unserved rural and agricultural areas and preserve and upgrade mobile broadband where it is currently available. Importantly, the FCC must rely on realistic measurements of network experience on the ground to determine areas to support.

Croplands and ranch lands have lagged behind in adequate mobile coverage, even as demand for coverage has grown. To address this coverage gap, we urge you to consider a metric of broadband access in croplands (and farm buildings), or some other geographic measurement, in addition to road miles, to identify these areas of greatest need. "Cropland" coverage can be assessed using United States Department of Agriculture data for crop operations, the United States Geological Survey's Land Use classification, or other databases.

Agriculture is a significant generator of economic activity in our states. We greatly appreciate your efforts to ensure that the latest mobile broadband services are provided to all Americans, including those in agriculture whose livelihoods depend on it.

Sincerely,

ROGER F. WICKER
United States Senator

JOE MANCHIN, III
United States Senator

TAMMY BALDWIN
United States Senator

ROY BLUNT
United States Senator

RICHARD BURR
United States Senator

SHELLEY MOORE CAPITO
United States Senator

STEVE DAINES
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