



High-speed broadband Internet access has become today's essential service, but new government rules being proposed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) could impact your access to broadband Internet service. You can help by lending your voice to the debate.

At the onset of telephone service back in the 1950s, the federal government created a universal service policy to ensure that all Americans—including those in rural areas—have access to affordable communications services. The government decided these were essential services that required financial support to build and maintain. As a result, it created something called the Universal Service Fund (USF).

Like many rural companies, Hamilton County Telephone Co-op has been the recipient of USF and invested millions of dollars over the years to build advanced networks to meet the needs of customers. We've done this with the understanding that the government would continue to support our efforts through USF. Without receiving support from the federal government, it would be impossible for us to maintain our existing infrastructure as well as expand our capabilities to meet our customer needs in the future. As with our national highway system, the information highway costs money to sustain.

Federal support has made it possible for our company to deliver the network that spurs economic opportunity, supports educational options and increases our ability to attract new businesses to our area. Now the government is thinking about changing the fund. But if this federal support gets cut, our rural county areas could get stuck on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The FCC wants to do away with USF and other financing methods that support rural, high-cost telephone and broadband services. It wants to create something called the Connect America Fund. While this is a good idea to help facilitate the transition to support for increased broadband services in rural communities, FCC officials need to ensure that they don't destroy the funding that now delivers telecommunications services to the rural areas of America.

All rural consumers need to get educated about the proposed policies and communicate to members of Congress and the White House about the negative impact this could have on our community. The current FCC proposal would penalize rural broadband providers such as our co-op, and put existing affordable, high-quality broadband service for rural areas in serious jeopardy. Also, it would undermine our ability to upgrade that service in the future.

The current USF structure has been a great success story for our country. It has enabled our country to stay connected. It has allowed our co-op to deliver on the promise of affordable, advanced communications services for rural consumers and business. But the job isn't done.

As consumers, you can make a difference in this debate. Your contact with policy-makers will ensure that the FCC makes the right changes to USF so that rural communities remain connected to the global world and may reap the rewards of an accessible, affordable and sustainable broadband network.

To support this effort, send a letter to your members of congress and the White House by visiting www.saveruralbroadband.org.

