



Statement of the New York Farm Bureau

**To the House Committee on Small Business
Subcommittee on Health and Technology**

*“Expanding Broadband Access and Capabilities
to Small Businesses in Rural New York”*

Presented by Kendra Lamb

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Thank you to the Committee on Small Business and to Subcommittee Chairman Chris Collins for inviting me to testify before you today on broadband access and its impact on small businesses here in Rural New York. My name is Kendra Lamb and my husband and his family own Lamb Farms, a dairy based in Oakfield, N.Y., with three milking facilities and a methane digester. We are a third generation farm family with a passion for producing quality milk while providing excellent care to our cows and the land. I am also speaking on behalf of New York Farm Bureau, the largest general farm organization in the state with 25,000 members representing all commodities, all production methods and living in all corners of the state.

It might be hard for some people to imagine, but New York State has some very rural locations and we have large gaps where broadband access is just not available, including here in Western New York. In today's age, with access to the internet, a small business can operate from anywhere. But similarly, it's hard to imagine a small business surviving and thriving in a rural area if it cannot be competitive in a world marketplace. The value of businesses in rural areas is recognized by New York State, which has been focusing on economic development in our Upstate communities where farms and small businesses are often the primary drivers of jobs and economic opportunity. But the lack of reliable broadband access is a major barrier to continued growth and we need the federal government to help solve this problem.

According to a 2013 farm computer usage survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 69 percent of farms in New York have internet access. This leaves 31 percent of our farms—or more than 11,000 operations—that do not currently have internet access.

But access is not the only problem, so is affordability and bandwidth. A 2010 study conducted by the Small Business Administration found that “rural small businesses pay significantly higher prices than metro small businesses for the same bandwidth, and small businesses in metro regions have access to higher bandwidth services than rural businesses do (at higher costs).” These kinds of inequities cannot continue if rural businesses are expected to compete with their counterparts in more developed areas. Congress must work through sufficient funding of the Rural Utilities Service and the Universal Service Fund, combined with any tax incentives, grants or regulations that are appropriate, to help increase access and affordability of broadband services in rural areas.

We are lucky that our main farm location has a broadband connection through our cable provider and my home has DSL through our telephone service provider. Without access to this kind of reliable internet service our farm wouldn't be able to do many of the key things we do to educate and reach out to the community. We have found that working in animal agriculture, it has become increasingly important to be able to educate the community on what we are doing on the farm and answer their questions in an honest and direct manner and we like to be on the leading edge of communication.

I am responsible for many of the public relations and outreach efforts of our farm. We have a Facebook page that I use to reach the community and educate consumers on our food supply. Without high-speed internet, I wouldn't be able to update this page with the large picture and video files that help us tell our story. We also have a farm website that we update ourselves and take requests online from those who wish to visit the farm. Twice a year we publish a farm newsletter for all our neighbors; moving this file back and forth across the internet while we perfect it would be impossible with a slow internet connection.

But we don't just use high-speed internet for our communication initiatives. Like most other businesses, we use the internet across many business applications to take advantage of the latest technologies, to collect and analyze data, and ultimately, to make better decisions.

Our farm takes advantage of the internet to connect our multiple locations and provide better management for our herd and employees. We log on each day to our milk cooperative's website to check on the amount and quality of milk that we have shipped so we can monitor any changes. We also use dairy-specific software to help with record-keeping, like tracking the milk production of each of our cows, which we download as large files off the internet. Like any software, sometimes there are problems, so we can get remote technical support from the technology company that is located two hours away in Ithaca, N.Y. If a technician had to visit our farm each time there is a problem, we would lose valuable hours of work and it would be expensive to get that on-site assistance. Similarly, we are able to monitor our methane digester, which uses waste on the farm to create energy, and get remote assistance from Pennsylvania—all over the internet.

We grow most of the feed for our animals and all of our crop record-keeping is through internet-based programs. These programs help us keep track of soil types, where waterways are located, setbacks and nutrient recommendations as well, which helps keep us in compliance with our CAFO permit and better oversee our environmental stewardship plan.

Much of our banking is done online now and our employee time clocks and payroll software are web-based programs linked directly to our bank. Many of our vendors have gone paperless, so web applications allow us to view invoices online and keep our payments up to date. Even our employee benefits are updated and communicated through web programs so our workers have easy access to comprehensive information.

It would be hard to imagine our business, which has multiple moving parts from animal care to growing crops to human resources management, being as successful as we are without the efficiency and organization we gain from these internet-based systems.

Businesses like our dairy need high-speed, affordable internet to stay on top of the research and innovation that is available in our industry. As farm managers, we need to understand

changes in trade and world markets and in consumer demands. This helps us make business decisions from how many cows to milk, to what risk management tools we need to investigate.

In addition, more and more federal and state agencies are relying on electronic reporting from farms in order to comply with regulations. Efforts are afoot to make environmental and employee safety and health reporting electronic, completely getting rid of paper submissions. This is an untenable requirement that places extreme burdens on farms and other small businesses that don't have reliable access to the internet. While electronic reporting certainly can help streamline the work of government agencies, it is important that the Small Business Committee push back against exclusive electronic reporting requirements until all businesses have access to reliable broadband that is not cost-prohibitive.

While our farm does not direct market to consumers, many farms in rural areas do, especially fruit and vegetable growers through farm stands, farmers markets or CSAs. Websites, social media and online directories are invaluable tools for these farms to reach their customers. Today's local food movement means that farms are connecting with consumers in completely new ways and the marketplace is constantly changing as suburban and rural families evolve in the way that they seek product. Farmers looking for new outlets are exploring home delivery programs, buying cooperatives and community-based farmers markets—the internet is how they learn and explore new business models that can lead to success.

For many farms and small businesses in rural New York that are not connected to the world through the internet, they can face a feeling of rural isolation. This makes our rural areas less attractive places for people to live, spurring the brain drain and economic decline some of our formerly thriving small towns in rural New York have experienced. It is no secret that rural areas don't have the same access to education and health care as more densely populated areas. So rural broadband offers the opportunity for distance learning and telemedicine that can help make our communities even more attractive and viable places for young people, families and seniors to live. A large part of ensuring that our rural areas remain viable and contribute to economic development is making sure every citizen has access to broadband service.

In conclusion, access to broadband is essential for farms and other rural small businesses to manage efficient and successful operations, to reach their communities and customers, to stay on the cutting edge of their industry, and for our rural communities to be attractive places to live for our employees, customers and the next generation to run our businesses. We can't do this on dial-up or undependable internet connections.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share why reliable and affordable broadband access is important to rural New York and our farms and small businesses. I would be glad to take any questions you may have.

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