

**Testimony of Tim Waibel  
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**On the topic of “Supporting Entities through Investments in the  
National Infrastructure: Broadband” before the U.S. House of  
Representatives Small Business Committee Subcommittee on  
Underserved, Agricultural and Rural Development**

Chairman Golden, Ranking Member Hagedorn, and Members of this Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing and allowing me the opportunity to testify.

My name is Tim Waibel and I am a corn, soybean, and hog producer from near Courtland, Minnesota — a small town of about 611 people in southern Minnesota proudly represented in Congress by Rep. Jim Hagedorn.

I currently serve as the President of the Minnesota Corn Growers Association representing nearly 6,500 Minnesota farm families from across the state.

My wife and I raised 5 children who are now grown and starting families of their own. Two of them farm with us.

We are excited to have 6 grandchildren and looking forward to 3 more on the way this fall.

My wife and I feel very blessed to have been born and raised in rural America and we want that same blessing for our children, grandchildren, and future generations to come.

I know that Chairman Golden, Ranking Member Hagedorn, Rep. Stauber, and many other Members of this Subcommittee share the same feeling, having grown up in small communities.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic certainly taught us a lot of lessons.

One lesson that readily comes to mind is that there are certain advantages to living in the country — advantages that people living in the cities grew to appreciate more over the last 15 months, so much so that many picked up stakes and moved to rural America.

Over much of my life time, I have been saddened to watch communities like Courtland educate and raise wonderful kids only to see them go off to college and never return to raise their own families there, instead choosing the suburbs and the inner cities where there are more job opportunities and other attractions that Courtland cannot offer.

I've heard this scenario — that has played out across rural America, especially over the past 50 years — compared to strip mining where our most precious resource — our children — are plucked out of our communities and planted in the Twin Cities or the surrounding suburbs.

It's an apt description and, as you might imagine, communities such as Courtland have really suffered, and not just economically. We have lost a lot of beautiful talent over the years that could have added to the fabric of our little town in so many ways.

And, I think that those we have lost to the cities have also been deprived of some life-enriching opportunities: showing your steer at the county fair, knowing all of your neighbors, not having to lock your doors, serving on the volunteer fire department, running the vacation Bible school, being friends with people of all different occupations and levels of income, and the high quality of a lower pace of life, just to name a few examples.

So, the thought that at least some silver lining might come out of the tragedies of the past 15 months gives me a renewed sense of hope: maybe there will be a rebirth of little towns like ours.

Sure, we all enjoy being in the big city to watch a baseball game or enjoy a special restaurant or just to take in the sites and sounds of a place like Minneapolis-Saint Paul.

But, more of us may be able to do that while still reaping the benefits of life in rural America.

Which brings me to the second lesson.

We have all heard stories about how remote learning over the past 15 months has impacted our children.

While there is probably enough material there to write a few books on, I'm speaking mainly to the issue at the heart of this hearing: broadband and the availability of high speed internet.

Kids growing up on the farm or in rural communities who did not have access to decent internet service were undoubtedly at a disadvantage in their studies.

Senator Klobuchar mentioned that one young Minnesota student took an exam from a local liquor store parking lot because that was the only place she could get internet service.

Of course, this problem is not isolated to our school kids.

This is a problem for anyone who wants to live and work in communities like Courtland because it impacts education, business, health care, and yes, even farming.

Lack of high speed internet access is a serious obstacle to the kind of rebirth of rural America that I believe may be otherwise in the making.

That is why this hearing is so important and why I appreciate you inviting me to participate.

I'm gratified that in a time where there is considerable disagreement in the realm of public policy that there is bipartisan consensus on the need to make significant new investment in broadband to not only provide coverage to areas that are totally without service but also to substantially increase the quality of service to areas of the country that are poorly served.

But, as you know, throwing money at a problem does not always fix it.

Billions of dollars have been spent on expanding broadband internet access to the far reaches of the country but have come up short in achieving the objectives we are seeking to meet.

So, as you consider the path forward, I hope you will take into account a few points from the perspective of a life-long rural resident.

First, I think it matters who is providing broadband to our rural communities and farms.

Do they have a stake in rural America beyond making money in providing broadband service?

Do they have a proven track record in serving rural America?

And do they have the boots on the ground to get the job done?

From my vantage point, the Department of Agriculture, the rural electric cooperatives, and other similar entities with a long history of working with USDA check each of these boxes.

But, that's not where the lion's share of federal broadband dollars has gone.

Instead, billions of dollars have gone to other federal agencies to stand up programs using other broadband providers that are often protected from competition even if the service they provide is substandard.

My understanding is that there is interest at least by some in standing up yet another federal program to help broaden broadband access.

Frankly, I do not believe we are going to get a different result if we go down the same old road.

I understand that there is a fierce competition amongst the various government agencies and private providers in regards to who will carry out this important mission.

But, all I can say is that addressing the needs of rural America, including broadband needs, is the mission of the Department of Agriculture, not-for-profit rural electric cooperatives, and the like — and, yet, the dollars they have at their disposal have paled in comparison to the dollars under other programs and providers that simply do not check the boxes that I just mentioned.

If FDR had taken the same approach to rural electrification back in 1936, who knows how long it would have taken to bring electricity to the farm.

Whenever I buy goods or services, for my family or for our farm, my first question is who can I rely on to get the job done and to get it done right.

I look for folks who are in it for the right reasons and for the long haul.

I would like to particularly recognize Rep. G.T. Thompson, the Ranking Member of the House Agriculture Committee, who I believe has offered very thoughtful, bipartisan legislation that is worth your consideration.

The second point I would like to make is this: There are certainly gaping holes on the map in terms of people with zero service and we definitely need to address their needs.

But, there are even more gaping holes on the map where people have terrible broadband service that is way too expensive, especially for the service they are receiving. This second universe of people is as important as the first. Both need to be addressed.

I hope you will consider setting high goals for service in this process — perhaps 25/3 Mbps or higher — and if providers are not meeting this goal, open the area up for competition.

Some argue that this might lead to what's been called "overbuilding" but I believe that some overbuilding is needed if we are going to truly provide high quality service to everyone.

And, finally, from the perspective of a farmer, please remember that too often we talk about broadband service in terms of "locations served" where in the case of a farmer, we need to be focusing on the "area served".

Why is that?

Well, because while my farming operation not only needs the same kind of internet service that a business in town needs, including fiber to the building and fixed wireless, farmers also have mobile offices — commonly known as tractors — where we need to be able to upload data without wires as we work the fields.

This is not only critically important in our ability to feed, clothe, and fuel the country and much of the world, it's also vitally important to how we care for our natural resources, including the promotion of good soil health, clean air and water, and, yes, the reduction of CO2 and related emissions.

I know that many in Congress are interested in agriculture participating in efforts to further reduce or sequester carbon in order to help the U.S. reduce the nation's overall greenhouse gas emissions. Although agriculture accounts for a very small percentage of CO2 emissions and are already sequestering carbon through no till farming, the planting of cover crops, though methane digesters, and through biofuels, we are certainly glad to roll up our sleeves and pitch in using voluntary, incentive-based tools.

Farmers need any number of tools to be able to do this and one of them is certainly high speed internet access in our shops and on our tractors.

So, as you carry out the important work in front of you on the issue of broadband access, I hope that my perspectives are helpful in meeting your goals.

Thank you once again for inviting me to offer testimony before this subcommittee. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.