

March 13, 2025

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick:

On behalf of WTA – Advocates for Rural Broadband and the nearly 400 small, rural local exchange carriers we represent, I congratulate you on your appointment as the 41st Secretary of Commerce. Your leadership at the Department comes at an historic time for broadband expansion, and we deeply appreciate your commitment to ensuring all Americans have access to reliable, high-speed internet.

WTA’s broadband providers serve some of the most rural, remote, rugged, and expensive-to-serve areas of the United States. While these companies originated as traditional telephone companies in the 20th Century, they all provide robust broadband to their communities today. These are small businesses, typically employing fewer than 50 people and serving fewer than 5,000 customers. They are often the only option for broadband in the farming, ranching, Tribal, mining, mountain, and desert communities they serve. Yet despite all of this, WTA members are dedicated to closing the digital divide by deploying robust, high-quality broadband networks in these challenging environments.

We recognize and appreciate your commitment to "rigorously review" the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program. However, we urge you not to slow the momentum currently underway with BEAD. While we understand the need for oversight and refinement, we believe that major revisions to the program that would delay its implementation for a year or more are unnecessary and counterproductive. Instead, we encourage you to provide states and their broadband offices the flexibility to course-correct as needed, particularly regarding provisions related to permitting, labor, low-cost pricing plan options, and alternative technologies. Such an approach will allow BEAD projects to move forward and begin construction this year.

Additionally, we encourage you to authorize the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to release the BEAD funds for Louisiana, Delaware, and Nevada, as these states have already had their Final Proposals approved. By doing so, you can ensure that critical broadband infrastructure projects can break ground now and take advantage of this construction season.

WTA has long advocated for fiber as the preferred broadband technology due to its scalability, reliability, and long-term cost-effectiveness, consistent with the statute’s definition of a “Priority Broadband Project.” Fiber networks meet consumers' current and future demands while minimizing the need for costly network upgrades. “Tech-neutral” should not mean permanently relegating customers to a technology that may be able presently to meet marginally-acceptable performance standards that

will soon be outmoded, simply because the up-front costs are cheaper. At the same time, our members recognize that a variety of technologies are needed to serve different geographies, and we support a pragmatic approach that prioritizes fiber to the greatest extent possible in light of the positive externalities but acknowledge that some of the most highly expensive areas may require alternative solutions.

We look forward to working with you, your senior leadership team, and the NTIA Assistant Secretary to ensure that BEAD fulfills its mission of connecting all Americans to broadband. Reliable, high-quality broadband access is essential for full participation in today's digital economy and WTA and its members remain committed to helping achieve this goal.

Congratulations again on your appointment. We appreciate your leadership and look forward to collaborating with you to make universal broadband access a reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pat McElroy', with a large, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Pat McElroy
WTA President