

Friday, August 29, 2025

To the Honorable Members of the House Committee on Small Business

Good morning, Chairman Williams, Ranking Member Velazquez;

My name is Jeff Vander Werff, and I am visiting you this morning from the State of Michigan, where my family and I operate a farming and agribusiness operation near the town of Sparta. Like many Americans, we depend on reliable internet service as a part of our daily lives, and in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, that need has only become more acute. Thank you for the opportunity this morning to share some thoughts with you on this important topic.

As a small business owner and farmer, the internet is a part of our daily lives. From the connectivity of our precision agriculture software to the use of our cloud-based agribusiness billing systems, reliable high-speed internet is a necessity. The lack of infrastructure, however, has made that more challenging as our connected world evolves. It seems a weekly occurrence in our community Facebook group that someone is asking if there are better internet options available for their homes and businesses. Sadly, there are often only one or two providers in the area, and the coverage is less than ideal. Our family has tried to be a part of the solution to this problem for years, by installing and hosting broadband internet equipment on our farms, utilizing our elevation and the 130-foot-high grain systems to boost signals to help more folks access high speed internet. And while private industry is making strides every day to improve this, there is much more work to be done.

We often hear the phrase “the last mile” when describing services in rural areas, whether it be the postal service, Amazon, or high-speed internet. This is where the need is greatest. And while innovations such as Starlink have helped tremendously, often they are cost prohibitive, putting a further

burden on rural America, where poverty levels can match those of our most populated cities. I believe there is a better answer.

Growing up, I often heard my Grandparents talk about how life-changing the Rural Electrification Act of the 1930's was, and how much life on their farms and rural communities improved. Today, we are at a similar inflection point, with part of our country living in the modern area while rural America lags. This is just another contributing factor in the decline of our rural towns and the "small town America" we all love. It isn't just about businesses or farms being able to access internet service, it's about lost opportunities for rural Americans in an increasing digital world. From education and job opportunities to simple things like a placing an order for a tractor part, families are being forced to make hard choices when it comes to where they live and where they want to raise a family. The increase in online and virtual work has made it more difficult for young Americans to plant their roots in the hometown that their families have lived in for generations, further hollowing middle America.

I thank you again for your time this morning to discuss this critical topic and welcome any and all questions from the committee.

Thank you.

Jeff Vander Werff