

Written Testimony of Jimmy Todd

CEO and General Manager
Nex-Tech

Hearing on

“Wired for Growth: How Expanding Broadband Can Revitalize Rural Small Businesses”
before the Committee on Small Business
United States House of Representatives

September 3, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Williams, Ranking Member Velázquez, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today on the importance of fiber broadband for rural communities. My name is Jimmy Todd, and I am the CEO and General Manager for Nex-Tech, a local co-op that provides broadband to communities and small businesses in rural Kansas. Headquartered in Lenora, Kansas, Nex-Tech has 33,000 customers, serving over 11,000 square miles from the northwest to the central part of the state.

I have close to 40 years of experience working in the technology and telecommunications industry. My career has been dedicated to ensuring rural communities have access to the best in telecom, broadband, and precision agriculture. I was a gubernatorial appointee to the Next Generation 9-1-1 Coordinating Council and Team Kansas under the state Department of Commerce, focusing on community and economic development efforts across the state. I was also appointed to the Precision Ag Task Force of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), co-authoring a comprehensive report on related connectivity and technology needs on November 6, 2023. I also currently serve as a member of board of directors for the Fiber Broadband Association. In addition to my experience in the telecom industry, I am also a proud Veteran with 21+ years of service across the U.S. Navy, Army, and Army National Guard.

As someone who lives in rural Kansas, I've seen first-hand how robust fiber broadband transforms small businesses and entire communities. Broadband is more than a utility—it's vital economic infrastructure that connects all of us. With robust connectivity, rural communities can attract new

businesses, support entrepreneurs, and retain their workforce—including young people who often leave rural areas in search of opportunity.

For agriculture, fiber broadband unlocks precision tools that conserve resources, improve yields, and strengthen America's food supply chain. There are countless stories I can share, but one in particular exemplifies the difference broadband can make. Over a decade ago, my company was approached by a local dairy farm, McCarty Dairy, which had an opportunity to be a supplier for a national yogurt brand. In order to get the contract, they needed fiber connectivity. This farm was eight miles outside Nex-Tech's service boundary and would take an over nine-mile build to get fiber to their headquarters. Serving one customer that far away would never directly pay off on paper, but we also realized an opportunity like this in a rural area doesn't just impact one farm, it impacts everyone. We figured out a plan to get them fiber and, as a result, they won the contract. Since then, that little dairy farm almost tripled in size and expanded their business into two other fiber-connected locations. Today, through fiber-based technologies, they monitor the health of 32,000 cows, control the milk processing and condensing plant, and use robots to assist with the daily milking of 10,000 cows. This is a huge success story for a small, rural business. But this isn't a success story for just that farm—because of that contract they created local jobs, sustained family livelihoods, and brought economic growth to the entire community. That's the difference between having fiber and not.

In many rural communities, agriculture is the primary industry and many of Nex-Tech's customers operate small businesses in this space. When I was a child, the Farmer's Almanac was the only source of truth, but Ag Tech and Precision Agriculture changed the game on how to manage and operate successful farms and ranches. In farming, data helps increase yields, but also appropriately mitigates the inputs needed for the advanced yields and that is also good for our environment.

Today's farms use a variety of sensors, automated machinery, automated irrigation, and in some cases, as I previously mentioned, robotic labor. The data throughput varies by technology, but where

a sensor may be low data, a drone with high-resolution cameras may require extremely high data throughput. In many rural areas, connectivity has been a challenge, limiting their ability to take advantage of Ag Technology. As fiber has reached the farms and ranches, it has enhanced their ability to embrace new technology that will make their operation more productive and profitable. The Last Mile fiber network is needed to facilitate the high-functioning Last Acre network reaching across the acreage of our farms and ranches.

While there are plenty of success stories, small businesses and cooperatives still face burdensome permitting processes that delay builds and discourage investment. Permitting delays drive up costs, waste resources, and create unnecessary administrative hurdles. Congress can help by streamlining these processes so providers can deploy fiber faster and more efficiently.

My company was the first in the nation to bring fiber infrastructure to a rural exchange. We received a lot of criticism for gold-plating the network as a waste of money, but I am so glad we were not dissuaded from our belief in fiber and the potential it would provide to our communities and rural service areas. Fiber is the “do it once, do it right” investment—future-proof infrastructure that will support AI, smart agriculture, telehealth, and other innovations for decades.

According to the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI), rural counties with broadband adoption rates above 80% experience significant economic advantages compared to counties with low adoption. These high-adoption counties see 213% higher business growth, while similar counties with low adoption are losing businesses. They also experience 10% higher self-employment growth, driven by lower barriers to starting a business, better access to global markets, and improved ability to conduct research and connect with essential resources. Broadband adoption also correlates with significantly more business startups by rural entrepreneurs. From 2020 to 2022, counties with high adoption saw 18% higher per-capita income growth—an average increase of nearly \$500 per resident each year. Finally, these counties recorded 44% higher GDP growth, underscoring how

broadband access strengthens local business environments and drives sustained economic growth and innovation.

I highlight these points because our work is far from finished. According to FCC's Section 706 report "as of 2022, fixed broadband was unavailable to 24 million Americans." Thanks to the bipartisan efforts of Congress to improve broadband mapping—and the leadership of the FCC and National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in identifying where critical infrastructure is needed—we are making real progress toward closing the digital divide. But as we move forward, it is essential to prioritize the technology the private sector overwhelmingly relies on for its utility, reliability, and long-term value: fiber. Fiber is not just another option; it is the foundational infrastructure for copper, coax, fixed and mobile wireless, and even satellite networks.

I urge Congress to ensure federal broadband funding continues to prioritize fiber—the most reliable, scalable, and cost-effective technology. Further, Congress should cut red tape. Streamlining permitting will help rural America benefit faster. Finally, Congress should ensure broadband is affordable for all Americans.

Once again I thank this Committee for holding this important hearing and inviting me to testify, and I look forward to your questions.