Pennsylvania Farm Bureau

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Statement of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau

TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURE, TRADE, AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

REGARDING: HARVESTING THE DIGITAL AGE: CONNECTING OUR COMMUNITIES FOR A BETTER FUTURE

October 21, 2019

Presented by Brock Widerman
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Chairwoman Finkenauer, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to speak today on rural broadband and the importance for agriculture. My name is Brock Widerman. I am the President of Adams County Farm Bureau. I have served as President since 2017, and have been a member of our county board since 2012. My wife, Joy, is a partner/owner of JoBo Holstein Farm, a family farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The family milks approximately 1,000 Holstein and Brown Swiss cows, and raises 925 head of heifers, and grow corns for silage and ryegrass for forage on approximately 1,000 acres. I work on the farm as well, performing field work and mechanical repairs.

I offer today's testimony on behalf of Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, the state's largest general farm organization. We have 54 county Farm Bureaus, and members stretching across the state, representing a vast array of agricultural operations. Farm Bureau appreciates the opportunity to share our perspective on the necessity of broadband for the agriculture industry. Expanding broadband services to rural areas has been a chief concern of Farm Bureau. In today's testimony, I'll share some perspective on how we use broadband and technology at JoBo, some challenges my fellow farmers have faced, and the overall needs for agriculture.

Agriculture is Changing

Today, broadband is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity. I have spent my entire life in agriculture, growing up on a layer hen operation before joining JoBo Holsteins. During this time, I have seen the growing importance technology has played in agriculture. Now, technology is critical to our everyday lives, and fixed and mobile broadband is absolutely essential to modern agricultural operations. Farmers depend on broadband just as we depend on highways, railways and waterways to ship our food, fuel and fiber not only across the country, but around the world.

Many of the latest yield maximizing farming techniques require broadband connections for data collection and analysis performed both on the farm and in remote data centers. Farmers are embracing technology that allows their farming businesses to be more efficient, economical and environmentally responsible. Today's farmers are using precision agricultural techniques to make decisions that impact the amount of fertilizer they need to purchase and apply to their fields, the amount of water needed to sustain crops, and the amount and type of herbicides or pesticides needed. These are only a few examples of how farmers use broadband connectivity to achieve optimal yield, lower environmental impact and maximize profits.

Farmers rely on broadband access to manage and operate successful businesses, the same as small businesses do in urban and suburban America. Access to broadband is essential for farmers to follow commodity markets, communicate with their customers, gain access to new markets around the world and, increasingly, to ensure regulatory compliance.

Real-World Examples

There are so many opportunities in agriculture to use technology, but for it to be fully utilized, we need broadband access. For those of us who have generally reliable broadband access, it is sometimes easy to forget the role it plays in our everyday lives – because it is just how we do our jobs. We often take this access for granted, but the moment there is a problem, we are reminded just how important it is.

At Jobo, we recently invested in an auto-steer corn planter and GPS spraying technology. Already, these tools are helping us become more efficient with our crop farming and as we fully utilize this technology, we will become even more reliant on broadband access.

Moreover, as our equipment becomes more advanced, repairing equipment becomes increasingly challenging. I can't always run down to the local store for a part. As a result, I often use the internet – particularly my phone – to research how to perform an equipment repair; order parts – or determine which stores may have the needed parts; and for our more high-tech equipment, I may need to utilize tech support (sometimes from vendors overseas). Clicking a few buttons from the convenience of my phone can often streamline a process that once might have involved calling around to multiple stores or driving long distances to locate the parts and information I needed to make a repair.

Additionally, my wife is the herdswoman for JoBo, and is responsible for the day-to-day care of the cows. She uses both her phone and the computer for recordkeeping, and is able to look up milk records, past treatment plans, and other statistics that are necessary for cow and overall herd health. Being able to immediately look up information when there is a sick cow, or a concern about milk production, is essential for her job.

And, for a few more examples of the importance of broadband access on our operation:

- My father-in-law utilizes forward contracting for milk and for feed which plays an important role in helping keep our operation profitable and able to employ multiple generations of our family.

- JoBo Farms has a Facebook page to help educate the public about our family farm. As the public becomes further removed from agriculture, it is important that we educate the public, and social media is a efficient way for us to do that.

I've been able to tell you about some of the great things we can do with reliable broadband access, but there's also plenty of examples of the challenges farmers face as well. In fact, here are two stories of Pennsylvania farmers who cannot fully utilize emerging technology because they lack broadband access:

- *Bethany and Adam Coursen* – The Coursens own a dairy farm in Centre County—not too far from State College. A few years ago, the family made a significant investment in the future of their farm by installing a robotic milker. This technology allows a robot to do all the milking related labor on the farm, allowing the Coursens to focus on other farm tasks. In addition, the cows wear a device that collects relevant data that the Coursens can review to see if any of their animals need attention. However, the lack of high-speed internet service at their homes makes it difficult to get needed software upgrades for the equipment. It also prevents technicians from being able to remotely access their system and preform diagnostic repairs. They have been able to devise workarounds, using a cell phone hotspot, but this is in no way how the system was designed. The couple pays around $250 a month for satellite internet service that can go out when a storm passes overhead.

- *Timi and Keith Bauscher* – The Bauschers live in northern Berks County. Their farm is within reasonable driving distance of Interstate 78 and the encroaching development from Lehigh County. The Bauschers have several on-farm businesses that require reliable internet service, including a farm market. Along with needing good internet service for their social media and e-mail marketing, the Bauschers use a program to take credit card data from customers for sales. Using their current internet service at the farm would be too slow for credit card sales. Each transaction would take several minutes, which is not customer friendly. Nor is it realistic to require cash only sales in a world that has largely moved to credit card transactions. Instead, the Bauschers uses a service that stores all of their credit card transactions. At the end of the day, they take the device into their house and use the internet to process all transactions, which can take upwards of 30 minutes or more. They keep their fingers crossed that no credit card transactions are declined. But the risk is worth the potential loss of business that would come from not offering credit card sales.

Aside from on-farm necessity, rural broadband is also essential to the quality of life for rural Americans. High-speed internet access allows individuals to reach health care and educational services, government agencies, and new business opportunities. My three children are 13, 15, and 16 and recently the two oldest received iPads from the school. They are expected to do homework and assignments via their iPad. We are lucky to have reliable internet at our house, but for students who do not, the school suggested that students use the public library to complete assignments. I thought about what it would mean if I had to take my children to the library to complete school assignments every day – or even several days a week – and I just can't imagine doing that, while fitting in all the other day-to-day tasks and events for our family.

Yet, for many who lack reliable broadband, that is exactly what they face – traveling to get free Wi-Fi, so that they can complete a task. David Bentrem, whose farm is in Washington County, PA, doesn't have broadband – or even internet – on his farm, only a mobile hotspot, which typically wasn't fast enough for any major tasks. He has gone to the local McDonalds to back up his phone, on which he keeps a lot of his farm data. His daughter has used the McDonalds do homework or research for school as well. In today's digital age, families shouldn't have to go to libraries – or fast food restaurants – to do simple, yet essential tasks, that many of us take for granted.

Challenges and Opportunities

You might think these are isolated examples, but according to USDA's "Farm Computer Usage and Ownership, 2017", 29 percent of U.S. farms have no access to the internet, while according to the FCC[1], 26.4 percent of rural Americans lack access to broadband. In Pennsylvania, roughly 18 percent of rural Pennsylvanians lack access to internet service, or only have low-speed options. Research performed by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania[2] found that

[1] FCC Broadband Progress Report: https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-19-44A1.pdf, 2019.

[2] Center for Rural Pennsylvania's study: "Rural Broadband Availability and Access in Rural Pennsylvania": https://www.rural.palegislature.us/publications_broadband.html

median broadband speeds across most areas of the state do not meet the FCC's criteria to qualify as broadband. In fact, research showed that there were no counties in Pennsylvania where at least 50 percent of the populace received broadband connectivity, however, FCC's official broadband maps show 100 percent broadband availability across the state.

Put simply, this study has shown that actual on-the-ground upload and download speeds lag behind the advertised speeds by service providers, and also highlights that the current federally-available maps and data used to show broadband coverage is flawed. Without an accurate picture of broadband coverage, we will not be able to adequately direct federal funds for broadband buildout, or even know where the problems are by looking at a map.

The need for reliable broadband access is critical for rural America – and agriculture. Given the recent financial challenges of the farm economy, it is more important than ever to make sure we are utilizing all the tools available to agriculture. According to USDA's "A Case for Rural Broadband",[3] if access to broadband and adoption of digital agricultural technologies matched producer demand, U.S. agriculture would realize benefits amounting to nearly 18 percent of total U.S. market production, or $64.5 billion annually, based upon 2017 levels.

Farm Bureau Policy

Rural Broadband is a strategic priority for Farm Bureau in 2019. Our policy supports using the Universal Service Fund (USF) to provide affordable communication services for rural areas and to ensure rural telecommunication technology is equitable to the infrastructure in urban and suburban areas. Farm Bureau also supports using a combination of tax incentives, grants and/or regulation to increase the use of broadband access in rural areas. Using USF funding to improve rural access to modern, affordable broadband services is critical for the economic sustainability of rural Americans.

Moreover, Farm Bureau supports, H.R. 3162, *the Broadband Data Improvement Act*, This bipartisan bill would improve the accuracy of broadband coverage maps and better direct federal funds for broadband buildout. This bill corrects the current method of gathering broadband coverage data by requiring broadband providers to report data that is significantly more accurate, granular and transparent. More granular and accurate maps are critical to successfully target and distribute federal broadband program.

Conclusion

Farm Bureau appreciates the Subcommittee's interest and attention in rural broadband, and I hope my testimony helped to shed more light on the challenges and opportunities agriculture faces with this issue. Rural broadband is an essential part of agriculture, and Farm Bureau looks forward to working with you to make sure all of agriculture has access to reliable fixed and mobile broadband.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

[3] USDA: A Case for Rural Broadband: https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/case-for-rural-broadband.pdf