

STAKEHOLDER ANNOUNCEMENT

USDA Seeks Comments on Farm Bill Changes to Help Expand Access to Capital for Rural Broadband Infrastructure Deployment

WASHINGTON, Sept. 10, 2021 – U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Deputy Under Secretary for Rural Development Justin Maxson today announced that USDA is seeking public comment on a [direct final rule](#) to help expand access to capital to deploy broadband infrastructure in rural areas. The changes apply to USDA’s [Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans and Loan Guarantees](#) program and are in accordance with the provisions of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (the Farm Bill).

The Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans and Loan Guarantees program provides investment capital to eligible entities to help deploy telecommunications infrastructure, including broadband facilities in rural areas. Eligible entities are corporations, limited liability companies, cooperative or mutual organizations, Indian tribes or tribal organizations, and state and local governments.

USDA will make several improvements to streamline the application process. The department is seeking comments on the following reforms that will enable USDA to:

- Issue a notice to applicants who may be eligible to receive grant assistance through the Farm Bill Broadband Program, under 7 CFR 1738.
- Remove the requirement for applicants to provide a Certificate of Convenience and Necessity, which grants a company the authority to operate a public service.
- Expand refinancing limits to 100 percent for Rural Utilities Service (RUS) loans and expand limits to 50 percent for non-RUS loans. Refinancing limits will be published in funding opportunity announcements and will be based on funding amounts that are authorized in a given fiscal year.
- Add public notice filing and response requirements. This change will enable service providers to respond to pending applications that propose to provide broadband service outside of their territory.
- Add reporting requirements to ensure similar data is reported and collected across multiple USDA broadband programs.
- Set standards to ensure that programs are able to meet funding deadlines while maintaining the integrity of the environmental review process.
- Define “Retail Broadband Service.”

Interested parties may submit comments, identified by docket number RUS-20-TELECOM-0044 and Regulatory Information Number 0572-AC48 via www.regulations.gov. Comments are due by Nov. 9, 2021. For additional information, see page 50604 of the Sept. 10 [Federal Register](#).

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