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Rural Broadband – America's Future

High speed internet, or broadband, is nearly an urban legend. Rural Minnesotan's are saddled with low upload and download speeds, slow web surfing, data caps, and high prices. Their internet connections can support video calling, downloading pictures, or surfing the web—but only one at a time.

Broadband allows economies and communities to flourish in 21st century fashion. From mapping fields via satellite, to measuring fertilizer levels, to overseeing herds, high-speed internet allows farmers greater efficiency and more information. DEED's Lisa Hughes states, lack of broadband is a 'deal breaker' to prospective businesses. High-speed internet allows freelancers to market their businesses and to sell products. Education and health care benefit from internet access. Students can better continue their education at home when home has high-speed internet. Rural citizens can receive a college degree by taking classes online, an opportunity only open to those whose internet speeds support such activity. Health care files are often stored on servers, and digital X-ray images are replacing film, but cost is the largest hurdle to overcome in equal broadband access.

Internet service providers are hesitant to wire high-speed internet to sparsely populated areas, fearing their investment will not see returns. Minnesotans in rural areas pay exorbitant prices, roughly four times more than urbanites, according to Mark Erickson, economic development agency director. With dated technologies, rural internet often utilizes existing copper phone wires or television cables. Replacing this infrastructure with fiber-optic wires would increase the average speed of internet traffic to metro-like levels. However, the materials and labor needed to upgrade copper to fiber are costly. As the heavily rural generation leaves the workforce, and as rural industries such as mining, manufacturing, and timber continue to decline, broadband becomes the ticket for a stable future in rural Minnesota.

Steps local, state and federal government levels can take to spread the reach of broadband are many. The federal government should award grants to internet service providers to take the sting out of fiber optic costs and to encourage businesses to invest in rural communities. The grants would be tied with several restrictions: businesses would agree to use the public dollars in a 1:1 ratio with their own investments and businesses would wire the new systems to meet fast upload, download, and bandwidth speeds. The Governor's Task Force on Broadband has recommended allotting 200 million for internet infrastructure. This budget would cover at least two initiatives: subsidizing the costs of fiber optic connections and creating a panel to assist with broadband. This task force would include local experts in business and broadband, their mission being advising townships on the best way to gain access. The communities would have the final say in what type of technology they need and are willing to pay for, as the experts would provide direction. Nancy Madsen, *The Free Press* states, "For many in rural Minnesota, the information superhighway is a gravel road." A paved road is a necessity.