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Joy Sterling, CEO
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California Public Utilities Commission
505 Van Ness Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear President Picker and Commissioners:

In June, the California State Board of Food and Agriculture held a meeting focusing on broadband in rural communities. This meeting reinforced, through the testimony of stakeholders, that broadband connectivity is woefully deficient in rural communities of our state. Closing the 'digital divide' on broadband connectivity needs to be a priority, because the implications of not having broadband directly relates to the health, safety and economic viability of communities and individuals.

The Board is encouraged by the California Public Utilities Commission's (CPUC) recent modifications and enhancements to the California Advance Services Fund (CASF) to support broadband adoption programs in communities with low access. California must prioritize and accelerate the deployment/adoption of broadband access in rural areas. Actions, such as the CASF modification, help to make progress in bridging the digital divide but more action is needed.

In 2010, the California Broadband Council was established to promote broadband deployment and adoption in unserved and underserved areas of the state. Eight years later, significant challenges still exist. This Board believes that a public-private consortium should be convened by CPUC and the Council to specifically address rural connectivity issues and solutions. Our Board would be more than willing to assist in convening and having a representative serve on this consortium.

Further, as a result of the Board's June meeting, several key issues were raised by stakeholders that we believe warrant further discussion and action on a statewide basis. The first is the accuracy of broadband availability maps. The definition of broadband must be clearly defined (wired versus wireless; download/upload speeds) and coverage maps should not be determined solely by self-reporting of telecommunications companies. In addition, using a more precise metric than census block data in determining rural community eligibility is a necessity.



Another issue is the urgent need to connect county fairgrounds with wired broadband as part of public health and safety measures. County fairgrounds throughout the state serve as a critical resource (staging ground, shelters, et. al) during emergency situations. These fairgrounds, often located in rural areas, need wired broadband capacity to support critical operations during an emergency. The CASF should be modified to provide a direct allocation to the Governor's Office of Emergency Services (OES) to deploy wired broadband in county fairgrounds.

The importance of CAFS to bridge the digital divide in the state is unequivocal. Authorization and funding for the program extends until 2022. It is a priority of this Board that CAFS funding (\$66 million per year) be extended beyond the 2022 authorization to meet the needs of rural communities.

In closing, I would like to extend the Board's appreciation for Commissioner Guzman Aceves for prioritizing this issue and for engaging with Board on this important topic. The CPUC is a critical partner in bringing the public and private sector together to address this ongoing challenge.

Sincerely,



Don J. Cameron

President

cc: Karen Ross, California Department of Food and Agriculture
Mark Ghilarducci, Governor's Office of Emergency Services
Amy Tong, California Department of Technology