Eastern Sierra Council of Governments (ESCOG)
Joint Powers Authority Agenda

STAFF REPORT

To:	ESCOG Joint Powers Authority
From:	Scott Armstrong, Regional Broadband Coordinator
Subject:	**Informational Broadband Update**
Meeting date:	**April 24, 2024**
Prepared on:	April 15, 2024
Attachments:	none

The following report provides information and updates associated with the regional broadband activities. I would be happy to discuss these topics or any other broadband-related topics in more detail at your convenience.

General Broadband News:

On March 14, 2024, the FCC changed its definition of "broadband" to mean Internet service with download speeds of at least 100Mbps and upload speeds of at least 20Mbps (100Mbps/20Mbps). This definition will be the threshold for a location to be considered *served* for future grant programs. The federal BEAD program currently considers Internet service speeds less than 100Mbps/20 Mbps and at least 25Mbps/3Mbps to be *underserved*. Grant programs that have already been initiated will continue to consider Internet service speeds less than 25 Mbps/3 Mbps upload as *unserved* unless the programs are formally modified.

I expect the next increase to the *served* threshold within 3-4 years, probably with the broadband definition of symmetrical 250 Mbps or 500 Mbps Internet service. I'm basing the assumption of symmetrical service speeds on the latest USDA ReConnect grant program requirement for the delivered grant speed to be symmetrical 100Mbps service.

> *Proposed facilities funded by ReConnect must be capable of delivering 100 Mbps symmetrical service to every premises in the Proposed Funded Service Area (PFSA) at the same time. Specifically, this means every premises within the PFSA can receive 100 Mbps downstream and 100 Mbps upstream service at the same time.*

Grants Information:

BEAD (Construction and Digital Equity):

On April 4, 2024, the NTIA approved Volume 1 of the State's Initial Proposal for the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program. This volume includes the State's modification to treat DSL and Cellular Fixed Wireless Access service that is available at 100Mbps/20 Mbps or better as *underserved* to allow grant projects to fund future-proof infrastructure. The BEAD program allows project funding for *underserved* locations after all *unserved* locations are funded.

The State's BEAD challenge process will likely begin in May, but we're still waiting to hear the details of how that process will work. I'm expecting a State-developed speed test system that simplifies the process for Internet service customers to run a speed test and submit the speed test data to the Counties.

The State's [Digital Equity Plan was accepted by the NTIA](#) on April 2, 2024. "The [NTIA's Digital Equity] program aims to ensure that all people and communities have the skills, technology, and capacity needed to reap the full benefits of our digital economy." The State was awarded $4M to implement its plan to address "digital disparities in digital access, skills and affordability across the state."

FFA & Infrastructure Grant (Construction):

We're still expecting information on grant awards by the end of June for the CPUC Last-Mile Federal Funding Account (FFA) applications and the CASF Infrastructure Account applications. There was significant overlap in applications for project areas submitted for these grant programs, and the CPUC is working to determine how best to award funds under each program. There are no Infrastructure Account grant applications for our region, but there are FFA applications for Convict Lake to McGee Creek, June Lake, and Mammoth and the Lakes Basin in Mono County, as well as Aspendell, Starlite, South Lake, Lone Pine, Alabama Hills, and Pearsonville in Inyo County. The FFA program funds last-mile construction.

USDA BTA (Design only):

The network-design Projects for Hammil (Mono County) and Furnace Creek (Inyo County) are in the early stages, with draft Requests for Proposals for network contractors being reviewed.

Middle-Mile Broadband Initiative (MMBI)

Construction in southeastern Inyo to connect Death Valley is in the planning phase, with some conduit being placed as Caltrans conducts road work and road repairs. The purchase of the Digital 395 network is still in progress and is expected to be completed by the end of June 2024. The County Counsels for Inyo, Mono and Kern Counties are working to confirm the details and associated locations of any agreements and property rights that require County approval to be transferred from CBC to the State.

Broadband Strategic Plans:

The *Mono Broadband Strategic Plan* project team will meet in the next few weeks to discuss the various data sets that we have available and how best to present that data in a meaningful format. Types of data available include CPUC *served* and *unserved* numbers by census block, FCC broadband serviceable locations by address with no service or provider data, FCC provider-supplied broadband coverage areas and service speeds by census block, and Measurement Lab speed test data by zip code from August 2020 until the present.

The *Inyo Broadband Strategic Plan* will be based on the contracted Broadband Feasibility Study that was completed recently, and that effort is currently awaiting the return of a key individual in the next few weeks.

Affordable Connectivity Plan (ACP):

April is the last fully funded month for the Affordable Connectivity Plan (ACP). As of April 11, there is no news on whether the federal government will continue to fund the ACP. There have so far been no changes to broadband construction grant programs that require that ACP service plans be included in the services delivered.

Inyo-Mono Broadband Consortium Website: https://ConnectedEasternSierra.net/

BUDGET IMPACTS:
None.

LEGAL REVIEW:
Not applicable.

RECOMMENDATION:
None, informational only.