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December 17, 2020

**Erie Times-News**

Green acres with access to high-speed broadband is the place to be to find increased crop yields. That is according to a new FCC report from its new

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**Lawmakers are  
trying to use the  
end-of-year  
spending bill to pull  
Section 230 out of  
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Office of Economics and Analytics, which says that the growth of rural broadband has resulted in the growth of crops.

"Impact of Broadband Penetration on U.S. Farm Productivity" uses both FCC data and key crop—corn, cotton, hay, and soybeans—agricultural productivity data by county to draw the conclusion that increased broadband service has a "statistically significant" effect on lowering costs for fertilizer, fuel and seed and higher crop yields.

The FCC pointed to one example: A 1% increase in broadband connections of 25 Mbps/3 Mbps or better (the current FCC definition of high-speed) per 1,000 households was "associated" with a 3.6% increase in bushels of corn per acre. "I've had the chance to visit many farms and ranches during my time as Chairman, from Renwood Farms in Charles City, Virginia to Crane Farms in King Hill, Idaho," said FCC Chairman Ajit Pai, who hails from rural Kansas. "A constant theme I've heard is the boost in productivity that comes with the use of precision agriculture and other broadband-based technologies. This paper confirms these anecdotes, and underscores the importance of the Commission's top priority of expanding broadband access in rural and underserved areas."

President Donald Trump [has pushed rural broadband, citing its impact on agriculture](#). The President's American Broadband Initiative, launched last February, was driven in part by the President's desire to help farmers get high-tech connections for precision agriculture. – **Next TV**

US broadband growth continued to surge through the third quarter of 2020, but "pull-forward" growth driven by the ongoing pandemic will likely lead to a slowdown in 2021, MoffettNathanson analyst Craig Moffett predicted in a new report on the domestic broadband sector.

Led by gains of 1.38 million subs by cable operators, US broadband service providers combined to add 1.32 million subscribers in Q3 2020, up from net adds of 947,000 a year ago. They also turned in astonishing year-over-year growth of 4.7%, according to Moffett's estimates. US telcos combined to lose 65,000 subs in Q3, improving on a year-ago loss of 234,000, thanks in part to a rapidly eroding DSL base and pickup of broadband subs on fiber-to-the-premises networks.

Sub growth for satellite broadband, which accounts for just 1.8 million subs (or less than 2% of the market) and are often the best option in the markets they target, was relatively flat. Moffett notes that data on fixed wireless ISPs is not readily available as most don't report sub numbers publicly and tend to compete in rural areas. According to the report, the US broadband market finished Q3 2020 with a penetration rate of 84%. Thanks to US cable's continued strong showing, the 4.7% growth rate for the entire domestic broadband industry in Q3 2020 was the fastest in about a decade, Moffett noted.

But where all of those subscribers are coming from (wireless-only households, satellite broadband or new household formation) during this crazy period is not crystal clear. Several operators, including Atlantic Broadband and Cable One, have been offering temporary low-cost broadband options during the pandemic, but that's likely still not the main driver. Moffett believes the rise in fixed broadband penetration probably came through a combination of all these doors to various degrees. "The pandemic hasn't meaningfully increased the availability of broadband, but for some, it likely *has* made it more affordable or more relevant," Moffett explained. "It is not unreasonable to argue that, in a market where penetration stands at 84%, *any* acceleration in achieving incremental penetration of what's left can be thought of as a pull-forward."

But that full scenario – including the pull-forward growth in 2020 – has caused the analyst to revise his broadband subscriber forecast for 2021. At the same time, with so many questions and so much uncertainty still swirling around the

market, Moffett admits that "our estimates for 2021 feel less certain than normal." Still, it's all likely to mean slower broadband sub growth for cable operators in the year to come, though broadband margins should continue to rise. Moffett now expects Comcast to add 1.17 million broadband subs in 2021, down from a prior estimate of 1.37 million.

Charter Communications is anticipated to add 1.1 million subs in 2021, versus a prior expectation of 1.27 million. Charter's 2021 forecast includes the operator's expansion that will come way of the [phase I results](#) of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) auction. Moffett expects Charter to build ahead of the required RDOF milestones set by the FCC and see penetration of deployed locations rise to 75% over five years.

Among smaller cable ops in Moffett's coverage, Altice USA is expected to add 91,000 broadband subs in 2021 (compared to prior expectations of 110,000), with Cable One/Sparklight adding 29,000 next year (versus an earlier forecast of 38,000). The potential silver lining for cable here is that broadband growth is likely to be baked into analyst expectations and that it's possible that accelerating broadband margins will continue to beat expectations.

Moffett points out that Cable One broke the 50% margin threshold in Q3 2020 (51.4% to be exact) and all other US operators in his coverage posted record highs in the category. "The march of higher margins has been largely uninterrupted for five years now, making it all the more remarkable that estimates continue to come in too low," he said.

Meanwhile, the regulatory environment for US broadband is also somewhat cloudy heading into next year. Moffett's 2021 forecasts don't account for any additional broadband stimulus, though he points out that Democrats have called for earmarking as much as \$80 billion for broadband expansion. Moffett is also unsure if there will be a Democratic-run FCC because of the possibility that the departure of current Chairman Ajit Pai will leave the Commission at a 2-2 split and keep it that way if a Republican-controlled Senate stonewalls new Democratic FCC nominees. -- ***LightReading***

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I was struck by recent reports that 30-plus U.S. corporations have committed to creating one million new "family-sustaining" jobs for Black Americans, primarily those without college degrees. The effort, run by a nonprofit startup, ["OneTen,"](#) already raised \$100 million.

It comes in response to this year's focus on racial inequality, past failures to address it and the disproportionate toll of the coronavirus on Black Americans. Companies involved and promising to offer the jobs include heavyweights such as the pharmaceutical giant Merck, Target, Walmart, Johnson & Johnson, Bank of America, IBM, Verizon, Comcast and Nike.

The goal is outreach and training for entry-level but upwardly-mobile jobs in health care, retail, business and finance, cybersecurity and advanced manufacturing over the next 10 years. Merck CEO Ken Frazier, who is Black, a startup cofounder, acknowledges past and present job-placement programs aimed at racial economic gaps have fallen short. "All of us would agree that what we're doing now isn't working," he told the Wall Street Journal, adding, "It's this generation of CEOs who don't want to pass this down to the next generation."

Would that this generation of governing leaders in Harrisburg and Washington thought along the same lines. As in dealing with problems at their root and for the long run. And not only on issues of racial inequity, but on all issues touching everyday life. For example: Today, right now, in the darkest-to-date part of a public health disaster draining the savings of the unemployed and creating more unemployed, where is the thinking that "what we're doing now isn't working?"

Can Congress believe what it's doing is working? Only, I guess, if the best we can ever hope for from Washington is an 11th hour, cover-your-assets paste-up job of a short-term partial fix. For even [a new coronavirus aid package](#) comes several months late and with much less than needed. It is, as U.S. Sen. Bob Casey Jr. put it this week, merely "an interim agreement."

Meanwhile, such drop-by-drop delayed governance plays out as roughly 12 million Americans ([400,000 in Pennsylvania](#)) face almost certain lag times in getting renewed federal jobless benefits. Current benefits expire Dec. 26; [CNBC reports it could take weeks to get money moving again](#). Why let that happen?

Maybe congressional leaders have been just too busy focused on two upcoming run-off elections in Georgia (that will decide party control of the Senate) to worry about deadlines that don't affect them. Politics, after all, always seems to come first.

And what, pray tell, of Pennsylvania's legislature? Smart, timely, tackling the future? Hardly. More like stuck in the past. On the geologic scale. In the pre-vertebrate Paleozoic Era, when plants ruled the planet. How else to explain frequent mindlessness, such as declining to aggressively act on behalf of, as [Spotlight PA reports](#), 240,000 families who could lose their homes if a federal eviction-protection program is allowed to end Dec. 31?

Does Harrisburg think what it's doing is working? Gov. Tom Wolf, in September, asked the legislature to use [\\$325 million in federal coronavirus aid to help small businesses, including restaurants and bars](#). But asking isn't doing. Or insisting. Or fighting for. So, Wolf went along when the legislature responded by using all of the money to fund state government, including, of course, its own operations, salaries and expenses.

It's as if lawmakers in Harrisburg and D.C., those whose paychecks keep coming, whose health-care benefits continue, those unthreatened by food insecurity, don't even see the anxiety and needs of so many fellow citizens not so well off. Instead of responsive government in a pandemic, we get unending partisanship. We get politicization of science, masking orders and vaccines. And distracting divisiveness over the legitimacy of a presidential election.

None of this addresses the nation's needs. Big government isn't big business. Corporations are supposed to make profits. Government is supposed to serve the common good. But in this instance, government leaders could take a lesson from corporate commitment to "OneTen." And commit themselves to doing things differently. Because what they're doing now? It isn't working.

– John Baer's column in *Harrisburg Patriot-News*

