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Along the western Pennsylvania border, farmers struggle with such slow internet speeds that, in frustration, they still old-school print and mail their invoices. Some have no choice due to the lack of connectivity to internet service and email.

It is called the “digital divide” of broadband internet between rural and urban America, a gap technology experts say restricts economic development and jobs in sparsely populated regions. The Federal Communications Commission reports nearly 40 percent of the nation’s rural areas are without adequate broadband service. It has been trying to address the issue by offering \$1.8 billion in annual subsidies to telecom companies to step up and provide service.

In Pennsylvania, hopes for improving service diminished when Verizon turned down federal subsidies of \$138 million over six years to improve service to 64,620 rural homes and businesses. Big internet providers in others states have also rejected the FCC money, mainly because of the overall cost to deploy broadband service in remote locations.

Jill Foys, executive director of the Northwest Commission, a nonprofit striving to replace lost coal industry jobs in eight western Pennsylvania counties, said rural fortunes are tied to adequate internet service. She equates the fundamental need for rural broadband service to the essence of roads and phone service in the last century. “We’re looking at technological infrastructure in the same way,” she said.

The FCC subsidy program is known as the “Connect America Fund,” and telecom companies that turn down offers to tap it open up opportunities for rivals to benefit in other rural regions through an auction process. In some instances, states have put aside their own money to match the FCC offer and help fund broadband service when the telecom provider can’t see its way to accept the federal money.

New York officials successfully petitioned the FCC last year to keep \$170 million Verizon turned down to improve service in upstate rural areas because the state put up \$500 million to bolster the federal funds. Pennsylvania has petitioned the FCC to hold to its offer of \$23 million per year in subsidies over six years by giving it credit for making economic development grants available to also fund rural broadband service. Officials said nearly everyone in urban Pennsylvania has access to

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high-speed internet, defined by the FCC as offering speeds of 25 megabits per second for downloads and 3 megabits per second for uploads.

But U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, in a letter to FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai, said only 20 percent of the state's rural residents enjoy the same broadband speeds, and as much as 69 percent are saddled with slow internet service or no service at all in some counties. Losing the FCC subsidy money "solely as a result of Verizon's decision would create an unfair hardship to Pennsylvania residents in rural and high-cost areas, and would be contrary to the FCC's goal of ensuring broadband access for all," said Casey. A Verizon spokesman said it supports the Pennsylvania request to match the FCC subsidy with state support.

Margaret Horne, executive director of the Gannon University Small Business Development Center, in Erie, said the lack of broadband service impacts more than an inability to fast download streamed music and movies. She said it hits farmers and other rural businesses in the pocketbook. She said some farmers she works with don't even have internet service, never mind broadband. They are forced to use computers at the local library to send invoices by email. Or they print out their bills and send them via regular mail. It results in a disadvantage when "times are tough in agriculture as it is," she said.

In Cambria County, a smaller telecom company, Stix Broadband, has been working to increase internet service to the rural areas around Johnstown. Stix is erecting cell towers to offer broadband service to rural Somerset County, and co-owner Nick Weakland said the company could speed the process if it were eligible for FCC subsidies. Stix is not eligible because it doesn't offer basic phone service. – *Community Newspaper Holdings*

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In an effort to improve broadband internet access to the area, the Juniata County Commissioners adopted a resolution Tuesday, to join a cooperative effort to apply for a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission.

Tuesday's resolution came about as part of an ongoing partnership with Mifflin County which, in July of last year, conducted an internet summit that resulted in the creation of the Mifflin County Internet Committee. "After much effort and many discussions, the committee has come to a point where a feasibility study and master plan for improved internet services in both Juniata and Mifflin counties, and the entire SEDA-COG region is necessary to move forward," Brad Kerstetter, director of planning for Juniata County, said.

Kerstetter said the goal is to improve internet services, which will then provide more opportunity for business and economic development. "Our lives depend on reliable internet service with the technology that has evolved," Kerstetter said. He added that health and human service agencies, as well as industries, both rely heavily on internet access and service.

"Our educational system has become dependent on reliable internet access as well," he said. "Students are issued iPads but are unable to use them for homework assignments, as some areas of the county have no internet access. "It is both Mifflin and Juniata counties' intent to be proactive in an effort to provide better internet access and services to both businesses and residents by collaborating with telecommunications providers, businesses, residents, elected officials and state legislators to bring this effort into fruition." – *Lewistown (Mifflin Co.) Sentinel*

