Summary:

The $7.2 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act), signed into law by President Barack Obama, will provide funding for High-speed Internet access for those in rural areas as well as create over three million jobs in the next two years.

Faster, cheaper, accessible: The future of U.S. Broadband

By Cullen Curtiss

It's hard to disagree with faster and cheaper when it comes to broadband Internet access (defined as 768 kbit/s and over), but how about just plain accessible? **For some in the US, getting online demands an untenable amount of time, patience, and cash.** These folks might like an alt-dial-up option, but they're rural dwellers and the serviceable infrastructure hasn't reached them. Or they're situated amid satellite and cable options that are just not competitive. Well, perhaps their days of being deprived are over: State and local governments, Indian tribes, private business firms, universities, and neighborhood associations will be invited to make a compelling case for the grant money designated in the $7.2 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (Recovery Act), signed into law by President Obama on February 17, 2009 very soon.

With the taxpayer stash, the US Department of Commerce has tasked the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to operate the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) -- a $4.7 billion matching grants effort, designed to expand broadband services to "unserved" and "underserved" areas (definitions up for debate) of the US, and improve broadband access for public safety agencies. And the NTIA works with the Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service (RUS), now flush with $2.5 billion for broadband loans, loan guarantees, and grants. Applicants have to explain the whys and hows of their projects to get funding from one grant source or the other, and find a matching 20 percent investment from a non-fed source.

The third government agency involved is the FCC. They'll likely to mandate, among other things, that any networks funded by the grant money be "open access" -- i.e., usable by any service or device. But they also owe Congress a national broadband strategy by February 2010. Of course, this was needed yesterday, and critics worry that all of the stimulus finds will be claimed by the time the FCC rolls out their grand plan. Needed the day before yesterday is the FCC's nationwide broadband mapping status, but it's not due until February 2011. Critics here hope

the FCC will employ a different approach to broadband mapping than previously used -- if one household in a single ZIP code was wired, the ZIP code in its entirety was considered so.

Let's be clear. **The thrust of the Recovery Act legislation is not to make it easier to upload cute videos to YouTube -- it's designed to stimulate the economy and create jobs.** In fact, President Obama has noted that it will create or save 3.3 million jobs over the next two years. But it's also designed to get us up to speed with our international brethren. Based on a report titled [Measuring the Information Society](#) (PDF), published in early 2009 that ranked 154 countries on their use of information and communications technology (ICT), studies showed that the US had fallen to 17th from 11th place between 2002 and 2007. Without proper access, the notion is that adoption, literacy, and our economy suffer.

To suss out how the stimulus should be spent, [public meetings were held](#) throughout March 2009 in Washington and yonder, and [public comment is being solicited](#) on a wide range of topics, including, eligible grant recipients, broadband mapping, financial contributions by grant applicants, and success benchmarks.

How the application process will work is unclear, but it's projected that funding will occur in three waves, likely beginning in the fall of 2009, and ending in the spring of 2010. But come September 30, 2010, it's gone. Use it or lose it. Once the money is granted, the projects must be substantially complete within two years.

Will these government-funded efforts someday result in competitive, superfast nationwide broadband access? It's likely, especially since universal Internet access seems as critical today as the telephone and mail service were many decades ago.

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