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Telecommunications--New Ag Secretary Vows Focus On Rural Broadband

By Jerry Hagstrom
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Newly confirmed Agriculture Secretary Schafer today pledged to use the year he has in job before the Bush administration leaves office to increase high speed Internet service in rural America.

Schafer, who took office Jan. 28, devoted most of his speech at the Agriculture Department's annual Outlook Forum to the importance of rural broadband access. He said that high quality, high speed Internet service is vital for rural America to be equal with cities and suburbs -- and called for "a national conversation" on the issue of how to bring that service to places that do not have access to it today.

Schafer, a former governor of North Dakota, noted that -- while serving in that office -- he had "aggregated" information technology and telephone issues to make North Dakota "the most wired rural state in the nation." He also noted that he had later founded Extend America, a company that delivers wireless voice and data to rural America.

"Young kids talk about the advantages of a rural lifestyle" in which they can live in wide open spaces with clean air and good schools, he said -- while adding that "they also talk about lifestyle choices," including their desire for access to national quality sports and cultural events.

"Today broadband is transforming lifestyle choices," Schafer said -- explaining that, in the future, young people in rural areas will be able to listen to symphony orchestras in New York on large screen televisions and tour "virtual museums," as well as use holographics and socialize on the Internet.

If rural Americans have access to high-speed Internet services, they can "live free and open" and "still be connected to urban life," Schafer said, adding, "I think we can have an unimaginable impact on agriculture and rural lifestyles."

But he also contended that the high cost of building infrastructure always has made it necessary for government to play a role in bringing services to the rural areas. He noted that the railroads that began to appear in rural America in the late 19th century and brought "connectivity" for that era were built on a public-private partnerships.

"The railroad of the last century is the Internet of this century," Schafer said. He also pointed out that that the USDA had brought electricity and telephone service to large swaths of rural America.

Schafer did not propose specific policies to increase Internet penetration. But, in the past, he has said that he wants to make sure that the Rural Utilities Service broadband loan and grant applications are processed more quickly and efficiently than when his company made an application for such a loan.

Schafer indicated today that he wants to move quickly on his Internet agenda. "I'm starting out as term limited," he declared. "I can't procrastinate."