



## Hearing takes up ways to broaden broadband Net access in rural areas

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Deploying broadband Internet service to rural areas by using money from the Universal Service Fund was among ideas suggested Tuesday at a meeting on the state of high-speed Internet service in Arkansas. The fund in the past has given companies an incentive to provide telephone service in rural areas of the nation by imposing higher rates in densely populated areas, where it's more feasible to provide service. USF money cannot now be used exclusively for broadband service in rural areas. U.S. Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark., was among participants at a field hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation who supported changing the fund to specifically help broadband deployment. Broadband technology refers to electronic equipment or software that allows huge amounts of data to flow quickly on a global scale.

Arkansas ranks 47th of the 50 states for broadband deployment, Pryor said at the Central Arkansas Library System's downtown branch. Congress could help improve access by giving tax incentives for firms investing in the service and by strengthening math and science education to spur technological innovation, among other efforts, said Jonathan Adelstein, a Federal Communications Commission member. "Perhaps it's time for a national summit on rural broadband," Adelstein suggested, an idea echoed by fellow Commissioner Michael Copps. The summit could be mediated by the federal government and involve private companies, Adelstein said. The United States is falling in broadband penetration rankings compared with other countries, Adelstein said. Residents of other countries can download more information for less money; the nation was ranked 12th in "broadband value" in one report, he said in a statement.

Dozens of Arkansans, including high school students and the chief executives of Alltel Corp. and Windstream Communications, on Tuesday told Pryor and the commissioners about problems rural areas face in getting high-speed service. Michelle Neal, a student at Saratoga High School in Saratoga, was among students who discussed a survey they conducted in their communities through the Environmental and Spatial Technology Initiative, which promotes computer skills. The study focused on the lack of availability of broadband. Many parents in rural areas didn't know they could access their children's grades and test scores online, the students said. Some parents and students needed such terms in the survey as "broadband" defined. Students who lack fast Internet access, they said, sometimes must wait until they get to school, where there is better access, to do homework. David Burdick, director of the Pine Bluff/Jefferson County Library system,

said nearly all of Arkansas' public libraries connect to the Internet, but some feature dial-up or other slow connections. "[In] many cases we are letting our citizens down by not offering a fast and reliable connection to meet their needs," Burdick said.

Statewide and private sector solutions to the lack of highspeed access also were discussed. Connect Arkansas, for example, is a new public and private-sector collaboration to give broadband access to all Arkansas. It will map Internet connectivity in the state, including the speed of the services. It also will ask communities why they do or don't use high-speed Internet and will educate Arkansans on the need for broadband in their personal and professional lives. The Senate is working on a bill that ultimately could provide insight between broadband adoption rates and socioeconomic factors, Jeff Gardner, chief executive officer of Windstream, said in a prepared statement. Gardner recommended that the federal government provide some funding for poor people to own computers. "If consumers cannot afford a computer, they will not be able to use broadband" at home, no matter how cheap service may be, he said. For its part, Windstream recently started a pilot program that offers discounted computers to some new broadband customers, he said.

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