

Internet service in outlying areas

High speed can be slow to arrive

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In an era of lightning-speed Internet and zippity-quick downloads, Margaret Anschutz and her teenage sons live in the dial-up Dark Ages. Residing just south of the Ocala National Forest, the rural Lake County family is something of a rarity in a part of the state that's quickly being built out with subdivisions and strip malls. Though they live in rapid-growth and relatively high-tech Central Florida, the Anschutzes still live "too far out" to get high-speed Internet service. They aren't alone. It's too expensive for most Internet providers to run cable or phone lines to the region's sparsely populated areas. As Florida grows, however, the number of people living in high-speed-Internet dead spots is getting smaller. Providers can't map out those Central Floridians who lack high-speed Internet because they live in rural pockets. But in general, the farther families live from planned subdivisions or cities, the less likely they'll be surfing the Web at high speeds. Most Internet providers won't run the cable or phone lines needed for high-speed service unless they're sure they can sign up enough customers and make back the money invested in the expensive infrastructure. But the Anschutzes don't want to hear about the economics of high-speed Internet; they want faster service. "It's awful," said Anschutz, 45, a Florida Hospital nurse. "I don't even use the Internet at my house. . . . Most people are like: 'Oh, my God. You have dial-up. No wonder you don't use it.'" If she does use it, the consequences are time-consuming. "You could probably click on a map on MapQuest and run to the bathroom," Anschutz said.

A matter of density

Unlike in some states, Florida lawmakers don't have plans to make wireless Internet service available to all residents, telecommunications experts say. While officials in Kentucky, Massachusetts and Georgia recently launched initiatives to bring high-speed Internet service to more rural communities -- plotting with public and private dollars or partnerships -- Florida's leaders joke that statewide wireless is like "installing a sprinkler system in a forest." There's just so much area to cover, and the process is lengthy and extremely costly. Practically anyone in the country could connect online at higher speeds with a satellite-dish service. But it's unaffordable for many -- Anschutz estimated the cost for installation and service at about \$600 for the first month. It can cost \$70 to \$100 a month for the satellite service, and Anschutz said she would have to pay \$500 for the satellite dish and installation. Most home Internet users hook up to high-speed through cable or phone lines -- if they live in areas populated enough for those services to be offered. "Well, more than half the people of the state of Florida have access to high-speed Internet," said Steven E. Wilkerson, president of the Florida Cable

Telecommunications Association, an advocacy group for the state's cable companies. Statewide statistics from the Florida Public Service Commission suggest the number of high-speed users, including satellite, is increasing each year. About 70 percent of Florida's Internet subscribers had high-speed service during 2006, up from 63 percent during the last part of 2005.

Compare those figures with dial-up users. They peaked at 37 percent of all subscribers in 2005 and fell to 23 percent during the second quarter of last year. Often companies have density requirements before offering Internet service, Comcast spokeswoman Terri Weldon said. "We look at areas that have 25 to 30 homes per mile," she said. Bill Gilliam, Bright House Networks' vice president and general manager of broadband services, said service availability is "driven by cost and effectiveness. . . . It's cheaper to do it for a larger basis of the population. It gets more expensive [to provide the service] the more rural it gets." Population density isn't the only factor providers consider. The average age of a certain area's population can be important, too. "Not everyone wants it - - not everyone actually needs it," Wilkerson said. "If you're looking at certain demographics, generally younger people may see it as an absolute expected part of life. But there are other people that might not. It just depends on their use made of the Internet."

Seeking solutions

For 17-year-old Kevin Anschutz, quicker downloads are a necessity. With his college applications and homework assignments available online, the Umatilla High senior said he is too often a slave to his computer's slow connection. "I'll have reports due from two different teachers that you have to go online to get," he said. "It just takes forever." And forget downloading TV shows for his younger brother, 13-year-old Eric. That could take a whole day way up in Lake County's northeastern corner. About 100 miles away at the southern tip of Osceola County, would-be guests walk out of Yeehaw Junction's Desert Inn when they find out the lodging has no high-speed Internet. "They think they're going to get a Holiday Inn," said Rose "Cricket" Mitchell, who works at the historic motel. "Man, you're in the middle of nowhere." Watching potential guests walk out has not become a daily occurrence -- yet, Mitchell said. "But since the Internet has gotten really popular, it's been quite a bit."

Online initiatives

During the past few years, state officials in Maine and Massachusetts have led initiatives to bring wireless Internet to rural communities. In Massachusetts, the state Legislature in July created a new position -- director of wireless and broadband development -- to identify solutions for unserved communities. The state has yet to develop a comprehensive plan to fix the high-speed gap. But this fall, according to news reports, three western Massachusetts towns will participate in an experiment to test wireless networks in rural settings. Kentucky, meanwhile, plans to have full broadband coverage by the end of the year. In Georgia, state funding is available to create wireless blankets for Internet connection. The Wireless Communities Georgia Program awarded \$4 million to six local governments last year, and the Georgia Technology Authority gave another \$1 million to expand the initiative to more communities this year, according to reports.

Locally, high-speed Internet providers, including Embarq and Florida Cable, say they continue to roll out faster online service to rural Floridians. Already, Embarq says its high-speed connections are accessible to about 82 percent of people in Lake, Orange, Osceola, Volusia and Seminole counties.

How it works

High-speed Internet also is called broadband. It allows the user to access the Internet at much quicker speeds than "dial-up" services. Broadband transmission is digital, meaning that text, pictures and sounds are all transmitted as "bits of data," according to the FCC. That transmission moves those bits much quicker than traditional telephone connections, including dial-up Internet access. Broadband connections to home and business computers can be attached through existing electrical or telephone wiring, coaxial cable or wirelessly. But learning about the latest technology and various means of getting high-speed Internet does not help Anschutz. "Tell them to have patience is all I can say. . . It takes awhile to get out there," said Florida Cable President Gary English, whose company plans to expand its high-speed services to about 25,000 more Floridians by the end of 2008. Already a high-speed hub, the Fort Meade Public Library in southern Polk County has about 800 visitors a month using its four computers. "It's not a problem for our area," said Library Director Kay Jackson, referring to the town's population of less than 6,000 residents. "Now if you live out in the country, which is outside the city limits, and you live very far out there, there's a problem getting DSL [a type of high-speed connection]." But Jackson said her library has had past Internet struggles. Because its location is so far from Polk's other branch libraries, the building uses a different service provider. Pretty soon, it hopes to switch to a wireless network, Jackson said. "So people can sit in the library, in the parking lot, and use their computers."