

Tribal broadband access bill

Written by gallupsun
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Widespread access to the internet may be coming to Native communities

Washington, D.C. - Representative Deb Haaland, D-N.M., co-chair of the Native American Caucus, joined Representatives Ruben Gallego, D-Ariz and Tom Cole, R-Okla. to introduce the *Bridging the Tribal Digital Divide Act of 2020* the week of Feb. 10 to accelerate the deployment of broadband services to Native communities and bridge the digital divide facing Native communities.

The bill would expedite the deployment of affordable broadband service on Tribal lands by coordinating and improving the effectiveness of federal resources.

According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), less than half of households on Tribal lands have access to fixed broadband service. This represents a nearly 27-point gap compared to non-Tribal rural areas. This gap only widens when compared to the country-wide average.

In 2018, the FCC estimated that 35 percent of Americans living on Tribal lands lacked access to broadband services, compared to eight percent of all Americans.

“Access to the internet opens up opportunities for young people and economic growth for entire communities, but Native American communities are the most digitally disconnected in the country. Lack of internet access and broadband leads to disparities in student achievement, health outcomes, economic opportunities, and even violence. This broadband bill will deploy broadband so that our communities aren’t left behind in the digital age,” Haaland said.

The Bridging the Tribal Digital Divide Act of 2020 will:

Establish the Tribal Broadband Interagency Working Group to improve coordination across federal broadband programs and reduce deployment barriers;

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Require that technical assistance be provided to interested, underserved Native communities to develop a broadband deployment plan;

Streamline the application process for federal grants to support the deployment of broadband services on Tribal lands;

Establish a Tribal Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee;

Set aside FCC and USDA funds for the benefit of broadband deployment on Tribal lands; and

Establish the Tribal Broadband Right-of-Way Pilot Program.

“Adequate access to broadband is essential for strong Tribal economic development and the exercise of Tribal sovereignty. We must take aggressive steps to close the digital divide between Native American and other rural communities by better facilitating the deployment of broadband across Indian Country,” Gallego said.

Gallego chairs the Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples.

“In order for tribal governments to reach their highest potential, they must have the ability to utilize the same technologies available to the rest of rural America,” Okla’s Cole stated. “By advancing the distribution of affordable broadband service on tribal lands, we can indeed bridge the digital divide and improve tribal economic development and sovereignty.”

Other original cosponsors of the bill are Gwen Moore, D-Wis., Jared Huffman, D-Calif, Derek Kilmer, D-Wash., Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., and Ed Case, D-Hawaii

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