

Heinrich urges FCC to ensure equal internet access for Tribes

Written by Staff Reports
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Senator Martin Heinrich is leading the charge to ensure that rural Tribal communities have equal access to the internet.

At a time when people are being repeatedly reminded to stay in their homes, work from home, go to school from home, attend meetings from home and order online, the senator led 17 Senate Democrats in a letter calling on Federal Communications Commission Chair Ajit Pai to request that the FCC extend the 2.5 GHz Rural Tribal Priority Window by 180 days.

Extending this deadline would allow Tribal governments more time to secure access to unassigned spectrum over tribal lands suitable for mobile coverage and broadband services.

Because Tribes have historically lacked access to spectrum to deploy broadband networks on tribal lands, 1.5 million people living in Indian Country have been left without basic access to healthcare, public safety, and educational services.

As communities across the nation continue to face public health response and connectivity issues, **the lawmakers are urging the FCC to understand that** “these same challenges are also impacting the ability of Tribal governments to participate in FCC proceedings. Additionally, rural tribal communities represent some of the least connected people in America.

According to the FCC’s most recent Broadband Progress Report, more than 60 percent of residents on New Mexico’s tribal lands lack access to high-speed broadband. Furthermore, the Government Accountability Office found that the broadband data collected by the FCC overstates service in tribal communities, meaning the number of residents without access is higher than what was reported by the FCC. All of this underscores the need for more comprehensive assistance and engagement on tribal lands.

The letter was also signed by Vice Chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Tom Udall, D-N.M., and Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., and U.S. Senators Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., Jacky Rosen, D-Nev., Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., Angus King, I-Maine, Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., Kamala Harris, D-Calif., Ron Wyden, D-Ore., Patty

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Murray, D-Wash., Amy Klobuchar D-Minn., Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, Edward Markey, D-Mass., Cory Booker, D-N.J., Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii.

The letter is supported by the National Congress of American Indians.

“This pandemic lays bare the fact that many American Indian and Alaska Native communities lack essential services. Extending the tribal priority filing window and the start date for the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund would allow tribal nations to prioritize response and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic without having to risk missing a historic opportunity to bridge the digital divide,” National Congress of American Indians CEO Kevin Allis said.

Senator Heinrich also recently introduced legislation to ensure Native American communities have equal access to telehealth, education opportunities, and economic relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. The [COVID-19 DISASTER in Indian Country Act](#) would direct the FCC to grant Indian tribes emergency temporary authority of available spectrum on tribal lands so they can immediately deploy broadband networks on tribal lands during this pandemic. The bill has more than 200 endorsements from across the country, including more than 100 Tribes and Native Hawaiian communities.