

PERSPECTIVE

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With more than \$1 billion on the line, Oklahomans will play a crucial role in rural broadband expansion

Access to high-speed broadband internet service in rural Oklahoma has long been a top issue for Farm Bureau members. From conducting daily household tasks to streaming television, and from attending Zoom meetings to accessing important software updates on farming equipment, the ability to connect to high-speed broadband is crucial for Oklahomans living in both urban and rural areas.

From now until Jan. 13, 2023, Oklahomans have the unique opportunity to take part in helping Oklahoma's case for expanded broadband access through a coverage map recently released by the Federal Communications Commission.

The map shows internet service options for residential and commercial addresses across the state and nation. The Oklahoma Broadband Governing Board, created by the state legislature

in 2022, is encouraging Oklahomans to check their address and verify the accuracy of the service listings.

Mike Fina, the chairman of the OBGB, said the FCC map is accessible and functional, but it is not an accurate indication of available internet service in Oklahoma.

"The problem is, up to now, only the industry has put in their data," Fina said. "It looks like we are well-covered, but those of us who understand rural Oklahoma know that we are not covered at all."

The OBGB has the opportunity to distribute nearly \$1.5 billion in state and federal funding to expand broadband infrastructure in Oklahoma, but much of this money will be determined by the final FCC map.

"The way they determine the (funding amount) is based on the number of unserved Oklahomans we have," Fina



Mike Fina, executive director of the Oklahoma Municipal League and Oklahoma Broadband Governing Board chairman

said. "That map is our initial glimpse of what Oklahoma looks like when it comes to served and unserved areas."

Continued on next page ...

Rural broadband expansion (*continued*)

The Oklahoma Broadband Office will collect information from around the state but is asking Oklahomans to help. Residents can simply enter their address in the FCC map and view the available services listed. If inaccuracies are found, Fina encourages residents to take action and report them through the map's coverage challenge tool.

"We'll do a bulk challenge for everything that will be a little more formal than what the everyday citizen does, but I think it's important that people get out to do this process because it helps us have a better idea of what is happening," he said.

Fina, who comes from a family of dairy farmers in Collinsville, knows firsthand the challenge of keeping the family farm alive and understands the important role high-speed broadband access can play in the continued vibrance in rural Oklahoma.

There are many technological opportunities available that can improve agriculture and save the family farm, but they are not accessible without high-speed internet, he said. This is where the broadband funding can help.

"If we do our job right and really focus on rural Oklahoma with these dollars, that is going to be an incredible byproduct of our effort," he said.

Fina said it is crucial for all people – both rural and urban – to understand the importance of bringing high-speed broadband to rural Oklahoma.

"Those of us who now live in the city and go to the grocery store need to understand that, if we want to continue to have reasonable prices and milk in the refrigerated section, this is really important for rural Oklahoma," he said.

Although metropolitan areas like Oklahoma City and Tulsa have comparable internet coverage to similarly sized cities around the country, very few internet service providers have ventured into rural Oklahoma.

"No state has focused on rural broadband before," Fina said. "The reason for that is until now, it has been the ISPs that have really had any interest in getting broadband anywhere in the state. They look at rural Oklahoma and say, 'we just can't afford to do it.'"

The high cost of infrastructure is the primary reason rural Oklahoma has not

seen better coverage, he said.

"The problem is when you get into rural Oklahoma and our agricultural communities, everybody lives so far apart that it is hard to get fiber into those homes," Fina said. "When you get spread out and every house is a mile apart, it is really expensive to get that infrastructure out there."

Fina said many residents in these areas must turn to wireless solutions for internet access, but options are limited.

"It is all a business decision for (service providers), and if they cannot afford to get the infrastructure out to those parts of Oklahoma, they are not going to do it without some kind of incentive," he said.

Thanks to the funding the Oklahoma Broadband Office hopes to receive, Fina is optimistic that they will be able to encourage and assist service providers in expanding broadband infrastructure in rural Oklahoma.

"That is a big part of why we are really focused (on rural Oklahoma)," Fina said. "For once we can try to catch up."

The state legislature gave the OBGB five years to bring high-speed broadband access to all Oklahomans; therefore, it is crucial to finish the FCC map project as it will serve as a guide to the broadband board's efforts in the coming years.

Once funding is allocated after the map is complete, the Oklahoma Broadband Office and the broadband board plan to work with partners across the state, including rural co-ops and other internet service providers.

But Oklahomans will not see members of the OBGB digging in rights-of-way. Rather, the broadband office's primary role will be to distribute funding to their partners to implement the necessary infrastructure.

"It is going to be a partnership with a lot of different entities in order to get us to our end goal," Fina said.

The OBGB is also working with the Oklahoma Broadband Office to create a map similar to the FCC's, but with a specific focus on Oklahoma.

"When we get to the final map, it will be our scoreboard to see how well we did with these (funding) dollars," Fina said. "Ultimately, what it is going to be for the most basic user is that they will be able to identify their house and understand

what is available to them."

Fina said improved access to high-speed broadband will bring more people to rural Oklahoma and will make the entire state stronger.

"There are three things killing rural Oklahoma," he said. "It is the lack of educational opportunities, lack of economic opportunities and lack of healthcare. Broadband, although it does not fix all three of those, helps our rural communities get back on level footing."

With modern-day technology and appliances – including farming equipment – relying on a strong wi-fi signal, access to high-speed service is crucial, but current rural broadband is not fast enough to keep up with the modern world, Fina said.

"If we don't get rural Oklahoma into the modern world, we are going to keep falling farther behind," he said.

Fina believes agriculture will greatly benefit from improved broadband access, especially as agricultural technology and robotics advance.

"Farming is going to benefit greatly from the advancement in robotics, but (broadband) is the foundation for all of those things," he said. "If we want to bring that to Oklahoma farms, we have got to get the high-speed broadband out there."

To learn more about verifying your broadband service through the FCC map, visit okfb.news/BroadbandMap.

How to verify your broadband internet speed online

- 1 Access the FCC's broadband map online at broadbandmap.fcc.gov
- 2 Check the coverage options for your area listed on the FCC's website
- 3 If the information listed is inaccurate, click "Location Challenge," and dispute the listing(s)

Please note: The broadband map tool is provided by the FCC, and Oklahoma Farm Bureau makes no guarantees about the tool's availability or accuracy.

ESG, CDL requirements, farm bill among top issues anticipated by OKFB delegates during 2023 AFBF business session in Puerto Rico

Oklahoma Farm Bureau will send five voting delegates to represent OKFB members at the business session of the 2023 American Farm Bureau Annual Meeting in Puerto Rico.

Farm Bureau delegates from around the country will gather on Tuesday, Jan. 10 to discuss and vote on policy proposals to determine AFBF policy for the coming year.

OKFB members submitted grassroots policy proposals to be considered by the AFBF delegate body, and resolutions and ideas submitted by Oklahoma members will be heard on the business session floor.

One of the top areas of interest for the business session is anticipated to be the role and impact of environmental, social, and governance considerations upon businesses, and especially production agriculture. Numerous resolutions concerning ESG were submitted, and AFBF created a new title in the organization's policy book concerning the issue. OKFB members voiced their concerns about the potential use of ESG scoring on businesses during the 2022 OKFB annual meeting.

OKFB delegates will also be watching policy proposals focusing on changes to commercial driver's license

requirements. Farm Bureau members are especially interested in ensuring requirements for new CDLs and renewals of the licenses do not impose overburdensome requirements on license holders.

With farm bill discussions on the horizon, OKFB members will be monitoring policy proposals concerning farm programs, conservation efforts, crop insurance and nutrition assistance programs to ensure an appropriate safety net for agricultural producers is available while keeping federal spending at appropriate levels.

Environmental regulations, and especially the actions of the Environmental Protection Agency, are another area of concern for Oklahoma agriculturalists. OKFB delegates intend to support policies that ensure the EPA does not overstep its regulatory authority and ensure that sound science is used by the EPA to make decisions.

Oklahoma delegates will also watch policies concerning interstate commerce as well as trucking and vehicle regulations.

For more information about the 2023 AFBF Annual meeting, including virtual registration opportunities, visit annualconvention.fb.org.

Generation Bridge winter conference to be held Jan. 27-28 in OKC

Oklahoma Farm Bureau members ages 35-55 are encouraged to attend the second-annual Generation Bridge Winter Conference January 27-28, 2023, at the Hilton Garden Inn and Conference Center in Edmond.

The conference will provide a chance for farmers and ranchers across the state to network with fellow agriculturalists, grow their professional and leadership skills and learn more about the industry.

Generation Bridge serves as a stepping stone after Young Farmers and Ranchers as an opportunity for members to get involved in OKFB beyond the county level as they work to develop connections across the state, expand their knowledge of Farm Bureau and create lasting memories.

Attendees will have the opportunity to hear from industry leaders, attend sessions and much more.

Attendees must register online at okfb.news/BridgeConf23 for the conference by January 13. Hotel rooms are available at the Hilton Garden Inn in Edmond for \$114 per night and can be booked by calling the hotel directly at (405) 285-0900. More information will be provided as it is available.

For more information, contact Holly Carroll at (405) 523-2300.

Caterpillar member benefit updated for 2023

Eligible Oklahoma Farm Bureau members* can save up to \$2,750 on the purchase or lease of eligible Cat® compact track loaders, compact and small wheel loaders, skid steer loaders, small dozers, backhoe loaders, mini hydraulic excavators and telehandlers.

Members can also receive an additional \$250 credit on select work tool attachments purchased with new Cat machines (promotion excludes buckets, forks, thumbs, and coupler attachments). These discounts can be combined with any current retail discount, promotion, rebates or offers available through Caterpillar or its dealers, with the exception of the Cat NCBA membership incentive.

For a complete list of eligible Cat equipment discounts and to get your discount certificate, visit okfarmbureau.org/benefits.

For questions about the Caterpillar member benefit or any other OKFB member benefits, call Holly Carroll at (405) 523-2300.

**Must be a valid member of a participating state Farm Bureau for at least 30 days to be eligible for discount. Members must present a discount certificate at time of purchase or lease quote to receive the discount. No limit on discount certificates available to members, but one certificate must be presented for each machine purchase or lease.*



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