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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman Chairman, Committee on Energy and Commerce Oversight of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: Broadband” Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet April 2, 2009

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this very timely hearing. With over seven billion taxpayer dollars at stake, congressional oversight will be critical.

First, I am pleased to welcome a fellow Californian, Commissioner Rochelle Chong of the California Public Utilities Commission. I know my fellow Members will find her testimony today to be of great value, and I am happy she is here.

The agencies implementing the broadband programs in the Recovery Act face a difficult task. They must spend the taxpayers' money quickly, yet wisely. They must act decisively and make hard decisions on the rules of the programs, and they must do so in a manner that is fair, open, and transparent to the taxpayers.

This is a daunting challenge that must be implemented under intense scrutiny. Nobody wants taxpayer money funding a digital bridge to nowhere.

So far, I am very pleased with the agencies' progress, and I look forward to learning more today.

As we crafted the broadband programs in the Recovery Act, we were careful not to lose sight of the primary goal of the legislation — to create and preserve jobs. I hope that the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) keep that primary goal in mind as they move forward.

There are some who may hope to re-characterize the statute to mandate that “unserved” areas be given prioritization over “underserved” areas. In fact, this Committee rejected an amendment at mark-up that would have done exactly that, so I expect that NTIA will not be distracted by these efforts.

Congress did, however, give NTIA the flexibility to fund projects that meet the broad goals of the program, no matter where those projects are located. NTIA must also focus on sustainability so we do not see a subsequent run on other federal subsidy programs.

I am also interested in hearing how NTIA intends to implement the mapping provisions in the legislation. We know that accurate, verifiable, and transparent mapping of broadband capabilities can pay great dividends for consumers and for the governments that will use the data to craft effective broadband strategies.

Like many, I wish that all of the states already had accurate maps, but NTIA and RUS cannot wait until the entire mapping process is complete to begin its work. I am certain that this Committee will be vigilant in its oversight of both the program and the grant recipients to ensure that taxpayer dollars are well spent.