

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN RICK BOUCHER

Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet Hearing The National Broadband Plan: Deploying Quality Broadband Services to the Last Mile

April 21, 2010

This morning we conduct the second in a series of hearings focusing on the National Broadband Plan. I want to commend the FCC for the thoughtful work that underlies the plan.

The United States stands today 16th among developed nations in broadband usage, and for the benefit of our national economy and quality of life we must do better. In preparing the National Broadband Plan, the Commission has made a major contribution to our effort to elevate our national standing to a far higher number.

Broadband in the twenty-first century is as important as telephone and electricity were when they were first introduced more than a century ago. Today's hearing focuses on how to best deploy broadband to areas that are unserved and underserved, so that all Americans, including those in rural areas, may benefit from this essential infrastructure. We want to ensure that everyone has access to broadband, and we also want to ensure that everyone has access at meaningful speeds and affordable prices.

The National Broadband Plan reports that 95 percent of American homes have "access to terrestrial, fixed broadband infrastructure capable of supporting actual download speeds of at least 4 mbps," leaving 7 million homes unserved. I have serious concerns about the accuracy of this number and the methodology the Broadband Team used to derive it.

It is my understanding that for cable modem service, the Broadband Team looked at maps of where every cable operator is authorized to provide service. The Broadband Team assumed that a cable operator should have built out to its entire service territory. It also assumed that each provider was using at least DOCSIS 2.0 technology, which would mean that every home within the service area could get broadband speeds of at least 4 mbps downstream and 1 mbps upstream.

Unfortunately, not every cable operator has deployed service throughout its franchise area, and not every cable operator has upgraded to DOCSIS 2.0 technology.

For DSL service, the Broadband Team relied on broadband maps from states that have already completed them. The Team calculated where homes should be able to receive DSL service of at least 4 mbps downstream and 1 mbps upstream based on where those maps indicated there is broadband infrastructure. The Team also estimated that homes within a certain number of feet of central offices should be able to receive broadband. The Team then extrapolated those figures to the entire country.

Unfortunately, my experience with the completed broadband map in my home State of Virginia has been less than satisfactory. The map is based on data provided by the telephone companies, and it over-reports the availability of broadband in my district and I'm sure elsewhere. I frequently hear complaints from constituents who live in communities that the Virginia broadband map indicates are served, yet these constituents are persistently asking me for broadband service because they have none.

To the extent that the Broadband Team extrapolated data from the Virginia broadband map and others like it, I cannot, based on my experience, consider it reliable.

I appreciate that Mrs. Gillett will clarify in her testimony that the 95 percent figure is intended to be an estimate of homes that *should* have access to broadband based on what is estimated about where incumbent providers have deployed infrastructure. It does not mean that someone in an area the Broadband Plan predicts would have broadband service could pick up the phone, call their provider and get service. This is an important clarification, and one I hope all Members will keep in mind as we develop policies based on assumptions of broadband availability.

As we will hear from other witnesses on today's panel, there remain many areas of our Nation without access to broadband or with access to broadband only at slow speeds or high prices. It is far too soon to declare "mission accomplished" with respect to the goal of making broadband available to all Americans.

I want to thank our witnesses for joining us this morning. We look forward to your testimony.

