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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Broadband Loans and Grants”
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
May 16, 2012

Thank you, Chairman Walden, for scheduling this hearing. This is our third oversight hearing regarding the broadband programs created by the Recovery Act, and I support the Chairman’s ongoing effort to exercise our Committee’s oversight of these programs and ensure they are being managed wisely and responsibly.

I would like to welcome Assistant Secretary Strickling and Administrator Adelstein back to the Energy and Commerce Committee. Your efforts to set up the broadband programs are paying off. Broadband will soon be available in places where this essential communications service has never been available before.

In particular, I want to commend Assistant Secretary Strickling for NTIA’s transparency and accountability measures. These show that the vast majority of broadband grants awarded by NTIA are meeting or exceeding project benchmarks and are well on the way to being completed by the end of next year.

Administrator Adelstein, I encourage you to follow NTIA’s model. It has been harder for us to get information about the status of your grants than NTIA’s. More regular tracking and reporting of RUS projects would improve confidence in your programs.

We had a vigorous debate about the merits of the Recovery Act and the broadband programs it funded last Congress. Our role today should not be to re-litigate those issues. Instead, our focus should be on our joint interest in ensuring the funds are being well managed and the taxpayers’ interests are being protected.

We also have new issues to consider in light of the February enactment of the spectrum and public safety provisions in the bipartisan Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act. The law created a First Responder Network Authority or “FirstNet” to oversee the design and construction of a new broadband public safety network. It is essential that the projects funded by

public safety grants awarded under the 2009 Recovery Act be harmonized with the new FirstNet network.

I want to commend NTIA's difficult -- but necessary -- decision last week to partially suspend these public safety awards. We all want these public safety projects to be completed on a timely basis, but the ultimate success of these projects will depend on how well they fit into the rest of the nationwide network.

By going a little slower now, NTIA is helping to ensure that we achieve the nationwide interoperable network we should all want.

This short delay is prudent because it will help achieve the long-term goals of these grants. But, it should not become a prolonged slowdown. We need to do everything possible to help public safety grant recipients move forward as expeditiously as possible.

I thank today's panelists for your participation. I look forward to your testimony.