United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 8, 2015

The Honorable Penny Pritzker
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20230

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Pritzker and Secretary Vilsack:

In many places in America, the forces of the free market economy are driving investment in broadband infrastructure and delivering quality networks at competitive prices, but broadband deployment and adoption in rural communities continues to fall behind. Whereas fewer than one-in-ten citizens lack access to high speed broadband service in urban areas, it is the sad reality for a majority of rural Americans – 33 million people – whose innovative ideas cannot compete on a level playing field in a global economy.

As Co-Chairs of the Broadband Opportunity Council (Council), you have a unique opportunity to take a holistic view of our successes and failures at incentivizing broadband deployment and adoption in high-cost, hard to serve areas. The twenty-five different government agencies and entities represented on the Council have tried a variety of approaches to address this complex challenge, and we urge you to carefully review and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the various Federal initiatives administered by each member agency. We also ask that you coordinate with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) on this endeavor to learn from their extensive experience. A thorough understanding of what we know already works – and what important questions remain – will help to inform the debate about what more we can do to truly bring rural America into the 21st century. We request a detailed analysis of these initiatives and a list of best practices be included in your report to the President due no later than August 20, 2015.

We believe public-private partnerships can play an important role in solving the growing digital divide between urban centers and rural communities, which continues to stifle American ingenuity and sideline our entrepreneurs that cannot connect to high speed broadband services. Public-private partnerships have the ability to balance market-driven solutions with limited public funds to expand rather than duplicate existing broadband infrastructure. We look forward to working with you to promote broadband deployment and adoption throughout this country and welcome your guidance on the lessons learned from our previous efforts to solve this problem.

Sincerely,

Joe Manchin III
United States Senator

Steve Daines
United States Senator

Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator

Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senator

Cory Gardner
United States Senator

Dan Sullivan
United States Senator

Shelley Moore Capito
United States Senator

Patty Murray
United States Senator

Tom Udall
United States Senator

Jon Tester
United States Senator

cc: The Honorable Tom Wheeler, Chairman, Federal Communications Commission
The Honorable Mignon Clyburn, Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission
The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel, Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission
The Honorable Ajit Pai, Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission
The Honorable Michael O'Rielly, Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission