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FCC '800-Pound Gorilla'

Tribes Hope Biden Administration Helps Boost Broadband

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Native American tribes are seeking more cooperation from the FCC and other federal agencies to expand broadband access. With the new Biden administration, tribal leaders and advocacy groups said in recent interviews that they're optimistic for better intergovernmental coordination.

Each tribal nation has specific circumstances that affect broadband deployment, said Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin, and that's why he's excited to see this administration seek immediate cross-agency collaboration: "When there is greater collaboration among federal agencies and tribal nations, programs that are implemented on the ground are more successful." With the COVID-19 pandemic hitting Indian Country hard, access to telehealth is a bigger need for those who rely on Indian Health Service facilities or community tribal clinics, he said.

Reservations lag in broadband deployment, experts say. Infrastructure, formal agreements and cost are major obstacles, said Partnership With Native Americans CEO Joshua Arce. "The cost is usually the biggest barrier," he said. "A lot of times, there's no [return on investment] for a company," so providers have less incentive to deliver broadband services to rural tribal lands.

Tribes deserve access to "reliable and affordable" broadband services, said Prairie Bighorn-Blount, American Indian Business Leaders executive director. "Tribal governments, as sovereign nations, must be granted access over the broadband spectrum on tribal lands." The FCC needs to give tribes the same access as companies, Bighorn-Blount said, and "work with tribes individually to plan and develop this key infrastructure within all tribal communities."

The FCC's latest broadband deployment report finds that roughly 21% of Americans on tribal lands can't get fixed broadband (see 2101190073). The commission's Native Nations Communications Task Force in December recommended establishing guidelines. They could require providers to request a needs assessment from a tribe, encourage providers to designate a Native American affairs representative to address tribal needs in a "culturally sensitive manner," and deter carriers from using rights-of-way and other permitting requirements to deny services on tribal lands.

The FCC is "the 800-pound gorilla" that can put these recommendations into action, Arce said. "It's one thing to have a nice government plan available, but implementing it is more important than having it sit on the shelf." The FCC didn't respond Monday on

whether it intends to act on the task force's recommendations. When it does act, each community will need to be treated individually because each is a sovereign nation, Arce said. The agency "has the muscle to do it" and must "be able to have a framework that has some flexibility" because community needs vary, he said. "Having the backing of the federal government at multiple levels is also going to be something that can help tip this into more than just a talking point, but a reality."

"It's essential that the FCC work, in coordination with [the Department of Commerce] and in consultation with tribes, to quickly implement the statutorily provisioned programs with the most flexibility to bring affordable, reliable broadband to reservations," Hoskin said. It's important the programs are sustainable, he said. Meantime, Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma partnered with AT&T to deploy mobile hot spots and parking lot Wi-Fi. AT&T is working with tribal governments and communities to increase access, including building a new tower site for the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa in Wisconsin and providing connectivity for first responders at Navajo Nation, said a company spokesperson.

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