

CONGRESS LAUNCHES THE PRECISION AGRICULTURE CONNECTIVITY ACT OF 2018

Bi-Partisan Sponsors in the House and Senate Work to Extend Internet Connectivity to Rural America



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A bi-partisan group of Congressional leaders in both the House of Representatives and the Senate introduced the **Precision Agriculture Connectivity Act of 2018** on January 25, 2018. If enacted into law, the new legislation would facilitate the use of Internet and satellite technologies to enhance farming productivity across the United States.

The legislation was introduced in the House as [HR 4881](#) by Congressmen Bob Latta (R-Ohio) and Dave Loebsack (D-Iowa), and appears to have a companion bill in the Senate with the introduction of [S. 2343](#) by Sens. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) and Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.). Both bills seek to help facilitate the deployment of broadband internet across rural America. Expansion under this legislation would focus on ranchlands and croplands where broadband connectivity currently is limited or non-existent.

“Telematics” is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses telecommunications, vehicular technologies, electrical engineering (sensors, instrumentation, wireless communications, *etc.*), and computer science (multimedia, Internet, *etc.*). For agriculture, telematics encompasses the technologies that capture data from farm equipment operating in a field and transfer the data in real time to farmers and ranchers via the Internet. Especially for precision agriculture and ranching, *e.g.*, satellite herd maintenance for ranchers or site specific crop management for farmers, connectivity and speed of data transfer are critical. With greater connectivity, relevant, real-time information and data can be sorted, analyzed and used to help farmers and ranchers make critical decisions that can improve their efficiency and ultimately their crop and herd productivity.

President Barack Obama announced a [rural Internet connectivity initiative](#) in 2015 to expand broadband service by promoting industry competition and by making financial awards available in the form of grants, loans and tax incentives to existing companies and new startups willing to invest in better optic, wireless, and satellite infrastructure. While some expansion in agricultural connectivity has been noted over the last three years, many challenges remain, including issues related to upload speeds, wider coverage areas and better cyber security to protect personal and proprietary information.

For example, while great emphasis has been placed on download speeds in recent years, telematics require greater upload speeds than what is common, especially in most rural areas. Without rapid uploads, producers utilizing telematics technology often are prevented from real time uploads and must resort to later, after-the-fact transfers of field data from faster fiber optic connections back at the farm/ranch house or operations center later in the evening.

For telematics to work efficiently, those upload speeds in the field must be increased considerably, a task that so far is slow to develop. The sponsors of the Precision Agriculture Connectivity Act of 2018 hope to address those and related connectivity challenges directly, and accelerate the progress of extending broadband connectivity to rural America.

Agriculture trade associations have lobbied extensively for this new legislation, arguing that coordinated efforts by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Federal Communications Commission and public and private stakeholders are required to address the needs of precision agriculture and ensure that current and future generations of farmers and ranchers will have the necessary connectivity to achieve optimal yields, lower environmental impact and maximize profit. Broadband deployment in unserved and underserved croplands and ranchlands is essential to farmers and ranchers who produce food, fuel and fiber across the United States.

The proposed legislation creates a clear mandate for the FCC to work with other branches of government to develop a comprehensive strategy to both update America's rural I.T. infrastructure, and ensure that those investments meet the needs of farmers and ranchers and the machinery on which they rely. Specifically, the new legislation would require the FCC task force to:

- Identify and measure current gaps in broadband coverage on cropland and ranchland;
- Assemble a comprehensive guide of all federal programs or resources dedicated to expanding broadband access on cropland and ranchland;
- Develop policy recommendations, in consultation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to promote the rapid, expanded deployment of fixed and mobile high-speed broadband on cropland and ranchland, with the goal of achieving service on 95 percent of croplands and ranchlands in the United States by 2025;
- Recommend specific steps the FCC can take to ensure that available farm data from the USDA is reflected in developing Federal programs to deploy broadband to croplands and ranchlands; and
- Submit an annual report to Congress detailing the status of fixed and mobile broadband coverage on croplands and ranchlands; the projected future connectivity needs of agricultural operations, farmers, and ranchers; and the steps being taken to accurately measure the availability of high-speed broadband on croplands and ranchlands and the limitations of current measurement processes.

To achieve those objectives, the Precision Agriculture Connectivity Act of 2018 creates the **Task Force for Meeting the Connectivity and Technology Needs of Precision Agriculture in the United States**. Comprised of public and private stakeholders, the Task Force’s mission will focus on evaluating current programs affecting broadband internet access on croplands and ranchlands, identifying and measuring existing gaps in coverage, and developing within one year specific policy recommendations to address those gaps. The Task Force also is charged with developing specific steps the FCC, USDA and other federal agencies can take to address gaps in coverage.

At this point, the “dance of legislation” is just beginning for the Precision Agriculture Connectivity Act of 2018. GrayRobinson’s [Food Law Group](#) will continue to monitor the bills’ progress as they move forward in Congress.

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