

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4804

COMMITTEES
APPROPRIATIONS
ARMED SERVICES
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

April 5, 2019

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
The United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue,

As you know, in 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Rural Electrification Act into law as part of the New Deal. When this law created the Rural Electrification Administration, less than 10% of West Virginia had electricity, lagging far behind the rest of the country. This piece of legislation literally turned the lights on in West Virginia and helped bring us into the modern age.

Access to the internet is the modern equivalent to rural electrification. West Virginia's mountainous terrain and low population density make broadband deployment in the state extremely challenging and as a result, West Virginians have found ourselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. Without federal assistance, we will continue to fall further behind.

I am very excited about your agency's ReConnect e-connectivity pilot program and the potential it has to bring much needed broadband deployment to my state. There has been a lot of interest from West Virginians who want to make this ReConnect process work and help West Virginia get connected, but I have heard from numerous applicants who are concerned that they have not been given enough time and resources to successfully submit an application.

Specifically, I have been told that the full application for the program has not yet been uploaded to the ReConnect website and will not be available until April 23rd – less than 40 days before applications are due. This is unacceptable. We should be doing everything we can to encourage participation and make sure this funding goes to the places that need it most. I am concerned that this abbreviated process will limit submissions, result in more incorrect information being submitted, and leave little room for USDA to fix any potential issues that may arise with this new system. Therefore, I ask that the application be uploaded immediately, and I urge you to extend the deadline an additional 60 days to ensure applicants have at least 90 days to get familiar with the system and upload their application in a timely manner.

I am committed to do all I can to ensure this program's success both now and into the future. That's why I want to make sure we get this right the first time. If applicants aren't given adequate time to engage with USDA about the program and submit their applications, it may deter them from applying in the future.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and your commitment to making this program a success. I look forward to continuing to work with you to close the digital divide.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Manchin III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "M".

Joe Manchin III