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Oregon county, nonprofit testing rural broadband

- By GEORGE PLAVEN Capital Press
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Jim Cupples, of Springfield, Ore., is an adviser to the nonprofit Precision Ag Connectivity and Accuracy Stakeholder Alliance, or PAgCASA.

Courtesy of Jim Cupples

WEST SALEM, Ore. — A national nonprofit organization is working with Polk County in western Oregon to test broadband internet in rural homes, measuring whether the service meets minimum speeds required by the Federal Communications Commission.

The effort comes as $42.5 billion was appropriated in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill for states to expand rural broadband access.

Funding will go to "unserved" and "underserved" areas as defined by the FCC, which has identified download speeds of 25 megabits per second and upload speeds of 3 megabits as its benchmark for broadband service.

In November, the agency released its National Broadband Map showing what coverage is available based on information given by internet service providers.

The public has until Jan. 13 to challenge the map's accuracy, determining where grants will be prioritized to bridge the "digital divide."

Oregon's Polk County has hired the nonprofit Precision Ag Connectivity and Accuracy Stakeholder Alliance, or PAgCASA, to test internet speeds in two communities — Falls City, population 1,068, and the West Salem hills.

Polk County Commissioner Craig Pope said the National Broadband Map is showing these areas as having access to 25/3 megabits service, when in reality they do not.

"When you actually knock on those doors and test those homes at their router, you find that the service does not actually exist," Pope said.

Jim Cupples, a tech entrepreneur in Springfield, Ore. and adviser to PAgCASA, is leading the county's survey. Households agree to host a hardware testing device that monitors their broadband speed over several days.

The data will be used to challenge the National Broadband Map where the service is unavailable.

"To be frank, there should be 20 of me doing this all over the state," Cupples said. "If you change the map, you're talking about millions of dollars."

Fast, reliable broadband is quickly becoming a critical service for farmers and ranchers. Precision agriculture tools, such as real-time soil moisture monitors and remote-controlled irrigation systems, help to conserve water amid drought and save producers money on their electricity bills.

Virtual schooling and telemedicine are two other priorities that necessitate high-speed broadband, Pope said. He urged other rural counties to get involved.

"This is an important issue for our constituents," he said. "You can't do anything without at least 25/3 (megabit) service," he said.

Unless communities can prove they lack broadband access, they risk losing their opportunity for federal support.

PAgCASA was founded in 2019 by Peter Harter and Garland McCoy. The 2018 Farm Bill included a provision called the Precision Agriculture Connectivity Act, which required the FCC to form a task force reviewing connectivity and technology needs for precision farming.

Harter, who lives on a vineyard among the rolling hills west of Salem, is familiar with the area's broadband struggles.

"There are a lot of people who have no service," he said.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill has brought increased attention and scrutiny to resources for rural broadband, Harter said. PAgCASA is now working to ensure communities receive funding they are entitled under the legislation.

"You should not be disenfranchised based on where you happen to live and work," Harter said.

Cupples said he is going door-to-door in Falls City and the West Salem hills recruiting households to participate in the survey and offering a $100 gift card to host the testing device.

In addition to residential customers, PAgCASA is testing network speeds in schools, libraries, county government office buildings and businesses.

"It's quite a rush to work on a project where, if you have some success, it translates into people getting a needed infrastructure like broadband," Cupples said.

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