$6M grant will fund major broadband rollout

By RUDY DIAZ
EO Media Group

JOHN DAY — Christmas came early when it was announced Tuesday that high-speed internet is coming to town — all of them in Grant County.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's ReConnect Program is providing a $6 million grant to construct 89 miles of fiber optic line, connecting the cities of Long Creek, Monument, Seneca and Spray to Oregon Telephone Corporation's high-speed broadband network that already connects the other cities in the county.

This will expand broadband across a 242-square-mile area, with nearly 650 potential new customers — 418 households, 22 businesses, 22 farms, three schools and two fire stations — that can receive broadband access and high-speed internet services, according to information from the USDA.

"Internet access is no longer an amenity; it is an essential component of daily life, as important as it was for rural communities to gain access to electricity a century ago," said John Huffman, the state director for the USDA.

In a public-private partnership with the intergovernmental Grant County Digital Network Coalition, Ortelco has committed to providing the fastest internet access to as many residents at the lowest price possible.

Expansion of the broadband network will start in early 2020 and will be a progressive project that is expected to last for five years, according to Ortelco General Manager DeeDee Kluser.

"At the end of the year (2020), we should start to see some of our first customers," Kluser said. "We are not going to wait until the very end of the project, and then give access to the broadband. We will hook up people as construction completes and as we go through the towns."

Coalition board member Josh Walker of Seneca said he is excited to see the project come to fruition. He said he is currently taking online classes from Oregon State University, but the limited connectivity and internet speeds in Seneca would not allow him to stream the content online.

"I know that residents are anxious to see better service come our direction because I get a lot of questions on the progress of broadband because our community struggles a lot with access," said Walker, the former city manager. "It's not just a portion of the city. It's the entire city that struggles."

The grant funding requires a local match of $1.9 million that will be covered by Ortelco and the Grant County Digital Network Coalition, which includes representatives from John Day, Seneca and Grant County.

The coalition has access to funding, thanks to lobbying by the city of John Day to improve broadband connectivity in the county. In July 2017, before the coalition was created, John Day received a $1.8 million appropriation from the state legislature to modernize Grant County's digital infrastructure.

"This is a turning point for our community," John Day City Manager Nick Green said during a grant award ceremony Tuesday. "We are going to go from technology laggards in Eastern Oregon to technology leaders. That's my mission, and that's our objective."

EO Media Group file photo

A crew runs an optical fiber cable along South Canyon Boulevard from the John Day Fire Hall to the Grant County Education Service District building on April 3, 2019. A $6 million USDA grant announced Tuesday will provide high-speed internet access to Long Creek, Monument and Seneca.

Northwest farmers getting ready for FSMA inspections

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

HERMISTON — Federal inspections have begun at Northwest farms to ensure producers are complying with new rules intended to reduce the likelihood of food-borne illnesses.

The Food Safety Modernization Act, or FSMA, was signed by President Barack Obama in 2011. It gives the Food and Drug Administration authority to regulate how certain fresh fruits and vegetables are grown, harvested and processed before reaching consumers.

Stuart Reitz, director of the Oregon State University Malheur Experiment Station, discussed requirements and implementation of the law at the 46th annual Hermiston Farm Fair, held Dec. 4-6 at the Eastern Oregon Trade and Event Center.

Of particular concern to growers is the produce safety rule under FSMA, which covers everything from worker health and hygiene to buildings and equipment sanitation.

The rule applies to commercially sold products that are primarily consumed raw — such as onions, a staple crop of Malheur County in Eastern Oregon where Reitz works — to prevent the spread of disease-causing organisms like E. coli and listeria.

The FDA has exempted other types of produce that are normally cooked before eating, such as sweet corn and potatoes. Farms that made less than $25,000 in produce sales on average over the last three years are also not covered under the rule.

FSMA regulations went into effect in 2016, and on-farm inspections began earlier this year at large-scale operations making more than $500,000 in annual revenue.

"They'll start with the large farms, then work their way to small farms and very small farms over the next few years," Reitz said.

Inspectors prefer to arrive around harvest so they can see employees and machinery in action, Reitz said. The inspections consist of in-person interviews, observations and review of records to assure guidelines are being followed.

Reitz said the goal is "educate while regulate."

"They want you to understand any problems they might see, understand why it's a problem and how to correct those before they implement any penalties," he said.

One of the most contentious issues about the produce safety rule, Reitz said, was how agricultural water would be sampled and tested for harmful microbes.

Originally, the FDA wanted to use a more costly method under the Environmental Protection Agency, known as method 1603, to provide a direct count of *E. coli* in the water. Method 1603 is the same standard as used at swimming pools, Reitz said, and most agricultural labs are not set up to perform the test.

The good news, Reitz said, is the FDA ultimately relented and is allowing other sampling methods under FSMA to comply with the law.

The FDA also extended the time line for farms to comply with the agricultural water standards.

Large farms now have until Jan. 26, 2022. Small farms, or those that make between $250,000 and $500,000, have until Jan. 26, 2023, and businesses that make between $25,000 and $250,000 have until Jan. 26, 2024.

Reitz said he still does not know how frequently inspections will be conducted in the future, or how the FDA will prioritize its inspections. But he stressed that FSMA is a requirement, and farms will need to adapt to the produce safety rules while making sure they have the necessary training.

The Produce Safety Alliance has a number of grower training classes coming up in Oregon and Washington, including Jan. 30 in Ontario; Jan. 31 in Clackamas; Feb. 7 in Richland; Feb. 11 in Moses Lake; Feb. 25 in Walla Walla; and March 3-4 in Portland.

"You carry that credential with you for the rest of your career," Reitz said. "As long as you work on your farm, that farm is covered."