

Oregon lawmakers weigh in on need to bridge digital divide

Letter requests \$40B for broadband deployment

By George Plaven
EO Media Group

Members of Oregon's congressional delegation are joining the call to close the so-called "digital divide," extending high-speed internet access to citizens in rural parts of the U.S.

Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden joined 16 colleagues from across the country in sending a letter last week to President Donald Trump, requesting at least \$40 billion in infrastructure spending for rural broadband development.

"In an increasingly interconnected world and global economy, we must include in our discussion of infrastructure not just roads, bridges and waterways, but also high-speed internet access," the letter states.

According to the Federal Communications Commission, 39 percent of Americans who live in rural areas, or roughly 23 million people, lack high-speed internet access, versus just 4 percent of Americans in urban areas.

"While the vast majority of Americans have access to high-speed internet service, there is a stark disparity between urban and rural America," the letter continues. "This digital divide puts many rural Americans at risk of being left out of critical technological advancements and economic gain."

Oregon's lone Republican congressman, Greg Walden, has also honed in on the dig-



Sen. Ron Wyden
D-Oregon



Rep. Greg Walden
R-Oregon

ital divide, leading a hearing on broadband solutions last week in Washington, D.C.

Walden, who is chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, represents most of rural eastern, central and southern Oregon. He stressed the need to reduce what he described as "unnecessary roadblocks" to siting new broadband in rural areas, saying the environmental review process to build on federal lands is especially burdensome.

"I run into this issue all the time on siting," Walden said. "We're trying to get broadband out there, and we're trying to get three-phased power in some of our communities that have waited three years to get an (environmental impact statement) to get four power poles on BLM land. So I think there is an issue here with siting."

Closing the digital divide has made headlines early in 2018 after Trump signed a pair of executive orders in January to cut red tape for rural broadband deployment. Both orders are intended to make it easier for private companies to build broadband infrastructure, such as radio towers, on

federal property.

A coalition aimed at bridging the digital divide, called Connect Americans Now, also launched in January and is focusing on new technologies to deliver high-speed internet in rural America. Specifically, the group is pressuring the FCC to make TV "white spaces" available as part of the solution.

When asked about TV white spaces, Walden said he thinks they could be harnessed by internet providers, but he wants to make sure they do not interfere with existing users.

"You don't want to create unintended consequences," Walden said.

Last year, the National Association of Broadcasters opposed TV white space technology under development by Microsoft, saying it would threaten millions of viewers with loss of TV programming.

Both the Oregon Farm Bureau and Oregon Cattlemen's Association have joined the Connect Americans Now coalition, saying internet is crucial for farmers and ranchers to use precision farming tools and remain competitive in the market.



A Bell Huey helicopter hired by the Grant Soil & Water Conservation District sprayed weeds on 7,776 acres in the district since 2014.

Conserving water and soil, protecting habitat

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Protecting water quality and habitat for threatened or endangered species is part of the mission of the Grant Soil & Water Conservation District, the Grant County Court learned from District Manager Jason Kehrberg Jan. 24. Kehrberg thanked the court for its support as he presented an update of past activities and future plans.

Established in 1956, the Grant Soil & Water Conservation District operates under the state Department of Agriculture with no taxing or regulatory authority. It provides technical, financial and educational resources to assist landowners conserve soil, water and related resources.

The district's 4,031-square mile service area is divided into three zones and encompasses 89 percent of Grant County, of which 60 percent is public land. The district's staff of 10 includes engineers, technicians and a program assistant to handle the numerous grants it depends on, along with two full-time and two part-time workers in the weed program.

The district's mission is divided into four primary programs — rural landowner risk management; landowner conservation clearing house for financial, technical and education assistance; noxious weed control; and the federal Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program to help landowners protect riparian habitat by fencing, replanting riparian areas, weed control and alternative livestock water storage. The district received \$28.6 million in funding for these four programs over the past 15 years.

"I expect to get more CREP money in the future," Kehrberg told the court.

In 2017, the district received \$1.7 million in funding from 12 sources, including Grant County and various state and federal agencies. A quarter of its funding came from the Oregon Watershed



After a concrete diversion dam was removed from Beech Creek, the naturally flowing stream no longer blocked fish passage, but the irrigation headgate remained.

Enhancement Board. The Bonneville Power Administration was the second largest source, providing 18 percent. Landowners provided 7 percent, and Grant County provided 5 percent.

Weed control

The district's weed control program alone received \$2.5 million in funding from 2011 to 2017. That included \$610,821 from the Grant County Road Department and \$905,205 from the Title II Secure Rural Schools program. During that time, 6,613 acres of roadway and easements received bare-ground weed-control treatment in Grant County and a small portion of Wheeler County.

A total of 9,129 acres were treated by the district for noxious weeds from 2013 to 2017, including 2,493 private acres. Another 7,776 acres was treated since 2014 using a Bell Huey helicopter. District staff also average 10 to 15 biological-control releases per year.

"If left untreated, we could be seeing \$84 million in statewide impacts per year, based on the top 25 weeds alone out of 128 on the list," said Matt Wenick, the district's noxious weed program coordinator. "Every dollar invested in weed control gives a \$34 return."

Noxious weed infestations often can be human-caused, Wenick noted — spread by contaminated seeds used by ranchers to seed rangeland, contaminated hay eaten by livestock, or contaminated gravel used on roadways.

"We have no regulatory tool to prevent these types of infestations," Wenick said.

Wenick said plans have been made for weed control in the wilderness areas. The district, which began weed spraying on the Malheur National Forest in 2016, works with Forest Service botanists and invasive-species managers in developing projects, Wenick said.

In related work, the district has treated 6,320 acres of juniper and seeded 2,264 acres of private rangeland. A total of 137,800 pounds of seed was used to restore 4,100 acres of private land burned by the Canyon Creek Complex fire.

The district provided detailed maps and data to the incident commander during the fire to assist in planning for access, evacuation and deployment, Kehrberg said. District staff also assist Grant County's Firewise program by updating maps and supporting fuel-reduction work in the Pine Creek area.

In a collaborative effort with a number of agencies, the district has begun to restore grass and protect aspen stands

in the Phillip Schneider Wildlife Area near Dayville to provide wildlife habitat. This has included about 7,000 acres of seeding and 4,413 acres of rangeland weed spraying.

Stream projects

As part of its mission to protect fish in area streams, the district enhances riparian habitat by fencing out livestock and promotes fish migration by improving irrigation diversions. The district installs 20 to 30 miles of riparian fence each year. It also restored stream and floodplain function to Alder Creek by reclaiming a 25-acre wet meadow.

"We used small impoundments to create this riparian areas," Kehrberg said.

To enhance local fisheries, irrigation infrastructure that present a barrier to fish migration are replaced with flash-board or rock-riffle diversions. In the Berry Creek drainage east of Canyon Creek, four adjacent diversions were consolidated into one connected to a pump station.

"We've done several of these," Kehrberg said.

The district also has installed an alternative livestock-watering system in Logan Valley that included 3.5 miles of pipeline to 20 troughs. Solar-powered pump systems for livestock have been installed in the McClellan Creek and Izee areas.

Kehrberg said district staff must deal with difficult legal hurdles at times when making changes to streams, including water rights claims and the Endangered Species Act.

Monitoring the success of stream improvements can be difficult and require additional funding, Kehrberg said — especially when monitoring fish. Gage stations can be set up in streams to measure streamflow, or vegetation growth can be measured with LIDAR — an advanced aerial surveying method that uses lasers instead of radar.

Using LIDAR on a three-mile long section of the main stem of the John Day River upstream from Prairie City, the district found that vegetation volume increased 188 percent from 2004 to 2017 following riparian restoration work.

Looking forward to 2018, the district plans to spend \$183,000 on two irrigation diversions, \$74,000 on maintaining eight diversions, \$205,000 restoring natural streamflow in Big Creek impacted by mine tailings, \$450,000 installing 30 miles of riparian fencing and \$198,000 on four livestock watering systems. The district also plans to spend about \$450,000 on the first year of a five-year juniper thinning project.



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Born and raised in John Day, Attorney Donald Molnar is honored to return home and serve the residents of Grant County. Mr. Molnar is a graduate of Grant Union High School, Lewis and Clark College, and Lewis and Clark Law School.

He has been an attorney in private practice since 2005.

The Law Office of Donald J. Molnar
118 S. Washington Street, Canyon City, OR 97820
Telephone: (541) 620-5127 • www.molnarlawoffice.com

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