



MICHAEL BENNET
U.S. SENATOR *for* COLORADO

**Connecting Our Neighbors to Networks and Ensuring Competitive
Telecommunications (CONNECT) Act**

U.S. Senators Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) and Ted Budd (R-N.C.)

August 2023

Millions of rural Americans continue to lack adequate access to the internet, where the costs of connection can be high and existing service too slow or expensive to be of much use. While the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) ReConnect Loan and Grant Program provides broadband funding for eligible rural areas, the application process can be complicated and prohibitively expensive for small providers – those most attuned to the needs of their communities and committed to providing ongoing service to local residents.

The Connecting Our Neighbors to Networks and Ensuring Competitive Telecommunications (CONNECT) Act would reform the ReConnect Program's application process and boost the ability of local governments, nonprofit organizations, and cooperatives to compete for this critical funding. It works to offset application costs and creates a dedicated Office of Technical Assistance to help them complete the process. The CONNECT Act cuts red tape and reduces the time it takes to get funding to communities, prioritizing the needs of rural Americans and strengthening a key federal broadband program.

The CONNECT Act would:

- Establish an Office of Technical Assistance to aid eligible providers with application forms;
- Create a Mini-Grant Program offering grants up to \$20,000 for small providers;
- Prioritize applications from local governments, nonprofit organizations, or cooperatives;
- Designate rural areas that receive broadband service via non-wireline technology as eligible for ReConnect funding;
- Shorten certain permitting deadlines for USDA-funded broadband projects from 270 to 180 days;
- Create an interagency Broadband Council to recommend uniform speed and application requirements for federal programs; and
- Expand federal easements for certain electric utilities to enable them to lease existing fiber capacity.