

Research Articles, Bill Background Information



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Alaska Communications Expands Broadband to Underserved in Rural Alaska

February 4, 2021

In a year where access to internet connectivity became even more necessary, Alaska Communications expanded broadband service by more than 3,700 locations in underserved areas of Alaska during 2020.

This expansion is funded in part through the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Connect America Fund Phase II (CAF II) program.

In 2020 alone, Alaska Communications launched or expanded high-speed service available to homes and businesses in Delta Junction, Fairbanks, Homer, Hope, Kake, Kasilof, Kenai, Ninilchik, North Pole, Soldotna, Sterling and Thorne Bay.

"The pandemic underscored just how critical the availability of affordable broadband service is for accessing work, education, healthcare and staying connected with friends and family," said Bill Bishop, Alaska Communications president and CEO. "We're thankful for federal programs like CAF II, which support rural broadband delivery."

Once complete, the project will be the single largest deployment of affordable broadband under any one program in Alaska.

"Under the program, internet speeds are a minimum 10 Mbps download and 1 Mbps upload," said Bishop. "However, we chose to deliver higher speeds, up to 50 Mbps download, 10 Mbps upload, whenever possible to deliver additional value to our customers. Network expansions and new technologies we plan to bring to market this year will positively impact thousands of lives in both rural and urban areas of Alaska."

Source: Alaska Communications



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ALASKA Journal of Commerce

Alaska receives \$46.5M grants for remote broadband

By:

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Alaska Journal of Commerce

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A pair of Alaska telecoms are getting \$46.5 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and pitching in some of their own to install new fiber optic broadband networks in parts of the state's remote island regions.

Unicom Inc., a GCI subsidiary, will match a \$25 million grant with its own \$33 million investment to build a roughly 800-mile subsea fiber network stretching from Kodiak along the Gulf side of the Alaska Peninsula to Unalaska.

Residents and businesses in Unalaska will also receive "fiber-to-the-premises" network capable of providing internet speeds of up to 1 gigabit per second. The Kodiak Island, Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian communities of King Cove, Sand Point, Chignik Bay and Larsen Bay will also receive terrestrial broadband for the first time, according to GCI.

Southeast utility Alaska Power and Telephone Wireless Co. will receive \$21.5 million for its SEALink broadband project, which aims to provide a fiber optic network to all premises in the Prince of Wales Island communities of Kasaan and Coffman Cove. Contributing \$7 million of its own capital to the project, Alaska Power and Telephone also plans to install a 214-mile fiber optic cable running from Prince of Wales north to Petersburg and Juneau.

The rural Alaska broadband grants are part of \$550 million in grants awarded through the second round of the USDA's ReConnect Program.

CEO Ron Duncan said the GCI Alaska United-Aleutians Fiber Project will give Unalaska internet capacity on par with urban Alaska.

"Fiber service, the gold standard of broadband connectivity, will enable Unalaska, the nation's largest fishing port and a gateway to the American Arctic, and the other project communities to realize their full economic potential while advancing the national security interests of the United States," Duncan said in a formal statement.

Alaska Power and Telephone CEO Mike Garrett called the grant-funded project a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for residents of Kasaan and Coffman Cove to leap ahead of the digital divide.”

Work on the SEALink project in Southeast is scheduled to continue until 2025; at which point Alaska Power and Telephone says it will likely be able to extend high-speed broadband to other Prince of Wales communities.

GCI expects its Alaska United-Aleutians Fiber project will be substantially complete by the end of 2022.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski noted the need to conduct work and school remotely stemming from the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted gaps in Alaska’s broadband infrastructure and said the congressional delegation needs to continue to help rural communities gain the internet capabilities that are commonplace elsewhere in the country.

Sen. Dan Sullivan said high-speed internet access can be “life-changing,” particularly for rural Alaska residents without access to other communications infrastructure.

“Thousands more Alaskans across the state will finally experience a utility so many of us take for granted, one that has shown itself to be absolutely indispensable in the age of COVID-19,” Sullivan said in a formal statement.

Combined, the projects will connect approximately 7,700 residents and more than 360 businesses among other public facilities, according to information provided by the congressional delegation.

The grants follow the Alaska Legislature’s passing of Senate Bill 74 last spring, legislation sponsored by Sen. Lyman Hoffman, in part requiring that the minimum acceptable internet speed in Alaska schools be increased from 10 to 25 megabits per second.

Hoffman thanked the USDA, the congressional delegation and GCI in a statement from his office.

“This infrastructure expansion is critically important, especially with many students receiving an education online at home due to COVID,” he said.

Hoffman’s district covers much of Western Alaska, including the Aleutians and Alaska Peninsula.

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