



RURAL BROADBAND BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Wisconsin ranks 36th among the states in broadband accessibility in rural areas. According to [recent data](#) from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), 25% of our rural residents lack access to the standard 25 Mbps broadband. Governor Tony Evers has declared 2021 “The Year of Broadband Access” and pledged \$200 million over the 2021-2023 biennium to help expand broadband access. This investment will be critical to bringing Wisconsin’s rural communities into the 21st century.

“A lack of broadband access is hindering the economy in rural communities and putting some Wisconsinites at a disadvantage when it comes to business, education, and even health. Wisconsin Farmers Union appreciates Governor Tony Evers’ efforts to make 2021 the Year of Broadband Access, and we will continue to strive for a Wisconsin in which all people have access to affordable and reliable broadband, regardless of their zip code.”

— *Darin Von Ruden, Wisconsin Farmers Union President*

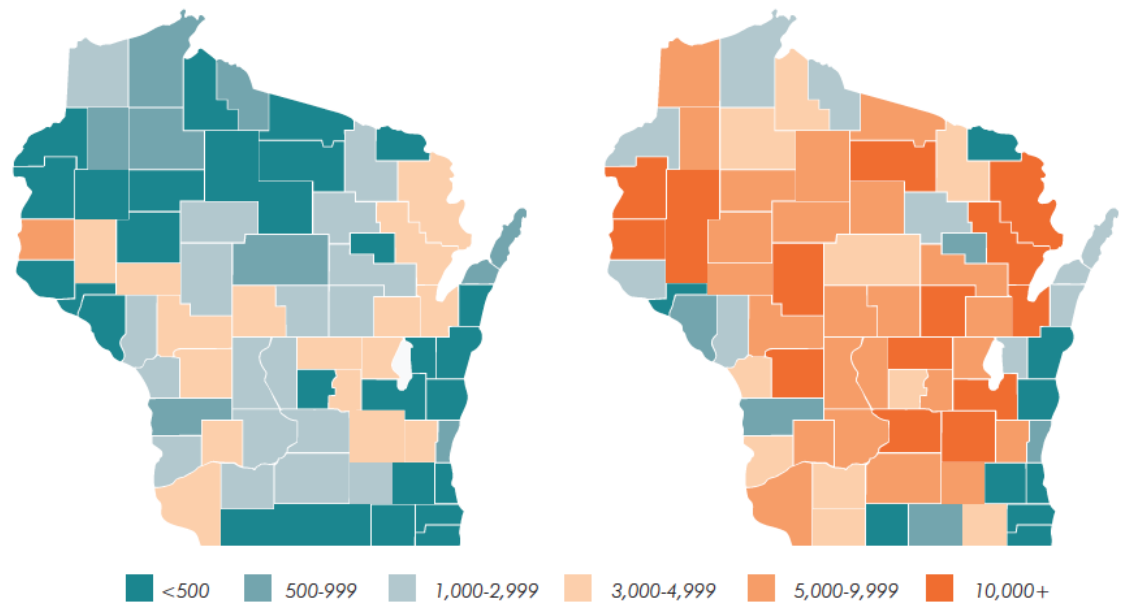
The COVID-19 pandemic has re-emphasized the critical importance of broadband infrastructure. A lack of broadband access disadvantages rural businesses, students and farmers, which lag behind their connected counterparts. Many of the rural residents who do have access face data caps and limited competition, resulting in monthly internet bills that are much higher than those in urban areas.

Low residential density in rural areas makes it costly for providers to offer service, leaving many rural residents without access to broadband. According to a [report](#) from research firm Forward Analytics, nearly half of Wisconsin school districts that serve fewer than 500 students reported significant problems with students accessing the internet at home (at least 25% of students had no broadband in the home). The adverse effects of access issues will grow as education, business, and government services increasingly shift online.

Farmers have been turning to technology to increase efficiencies, reach consumers, and conduct business. Their ability to access federal farm programs or reach a customer base shouldn’t depend on their zip code. Rural access to 25 Mbps broadband varies widely by county, as you can see by the map at right.

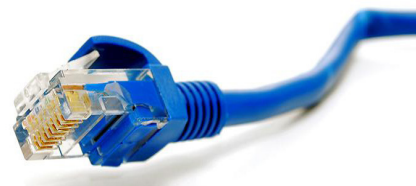
Wisconsin has seen some success in its efforts on broadband, but we must not abandon this effort while those in “last mile” stretches remain unconnected.

Figure 2: Rural Access by County
Number of Wisconsin Residents Without Access to 10 Mbps (left) and 25 Mbps (right) Broadband, 2019



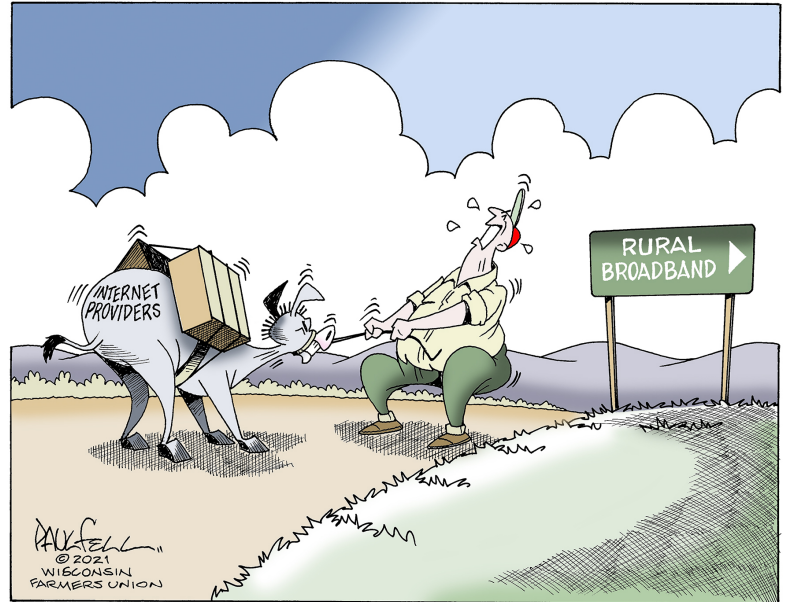
Source: Forward Analytics “Broadband in Wisconsin” report, November 2020

The highest levels of access generally are in the relatively small rural parts of urban counties, such as Kenosha, Racine, and Waukesha counties. However, in nine more sparsely-populated counties—Ashland, Clark, Douglas, Iron, Marinette, Price, Richland, Rusk, and Taylor—less than half of the rural population has broadband at available at standard speeds.



BUILDING TOWARD BETTER BROADBAND WHAT CAN THE STATE DO?

- Support the Governor's proposed \$200 million broadband investment in the 2021-2023 budget.
- Continue and grow the effective Broadband Expansion Grant program with strategic investments of grant funds to support broadband infrastructure in under-served areas.
- Promote public-private partnerships, prioritize high performance projects, and leverage additional public and private investment in broadband infrastructure.
- Coordinate and combine federal, state, local, and private dollars to broadband infrastructure investments.
- Prioritize small communications companies and rural electric cooperatives in public grant allocation to promote economic competition in the telecommunications industry.



Wisconsin Farmers Union is part of a coalition of agricultural groups that support a focus on broadband accessibility and affordability:



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