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Senate Agriculture and Rural Development Finance & Policy Committee Testimony of Brent J. Christensen on SF 1186

Good Afternoon Mr. Chairman and Members, for the record, my name is Brent Christensen, and I am the President/CEO of the Minnesota Telecom Alliance. On behalf of our 42 rural Broadband providers, I want to say thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. I am here today to provide some thoughts on SF 1186. In particular, I'd like to comment on three points in the bill.

First, I'd like to comment on the insertion at line 1.10 that the state must collect broadband deployment data "for wired and wireless systems."

We have no objection to this language, since it simply captures in the law the practice that already exists. That is, broadband deployment data is currently collected from wireline and wireless Internet Service Providers.

Broadband mapping in Minnesota started in 2008 and we lead the nation in the quality of our broadband maps. That's not to say that they can't be improved. The maps are only as good as the data collected and unfortunately not all Internet service providers (or ISPs) are as diligent as my members are. Current language has a provision to verify accuracy through on-the-ground testing. We think this is critical if we are going to develop reliable maps and would even support more testing.

Second, MTA supports the appropriation at line 2.2 of \$25 million in fiscal year 2022 and another \$25 million in fiscal year 2023. MTA members share the State's goal of border to border broadband and have been active in the Broadband Grant Program since its inception in 2014. We have 6 years of quantifiable data to prove that this program works and is successfully getting broadband to the most rural parts of our state as it is. Under this program, state funding compliments private investment and Federal dollars to catalyze build-outs of broadband to areas that otherwise wouldn't be cost-effective to serve. Also, multi-year funding – as this bill would provide – enables providers and the communities they serve to take the time necessary to put together high-quality projects, resulting in better service for Minnesotans.

Third and finally, we respectfully oppose the insertion at lines 2.7-2.8 that reads, “This appropriation must not be used in areas scheduled to be built out through federal assistance.”

The language in Section 2 of this bill does give us concern. There are several examples of communities using the Border to Board Grant program to enhance Federal dollars to achieve Minnesota’s state speed goals. Not all Federal broadband programs have build out obligations at our state speed goals of 25Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload by 2022. While some federal programs do have build out requirements of 25Mbps/3Mbps, others have build out requirements of only 10Mbps/1Mbps and believe it or not even 4Mbps/1Mbps.

For example, CenturyLink received Connect America Fund money to build out Sunrise Township in Chisago County to at least 10Mbps down, 1Mbps up. The township wanted faster speeds than that, so they applied for a state Border-to-Border Broadband Grant, which was awarded in 2016, and bonded for the match. Now the residents of Sunrise Township in that service area have fiber to the premise and will be able to meet any speed requirement in the future. If the problematic language in this bill becomes law, parts of our state will still be considered unserved even though they received Federal funding.

In conclusion, we believe Section 1 of this bill appropriate, but not absolutely necessary given current mapping language in statute. We appreciate the proposed appropriation in Section 2. The state/federal policy language in Section 2 could actually do more harm than good in the deployment of broadband to the truly unserved. We have committed to the author to work with him on improving the language.

With that Mr. Chairman, I am happy to stand for questions.