TELEPHONE: (202) 224-2251
http://indian.senate.gov

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6450

July 15, 2016

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

The digital age has made the Internet a basic telecommunications service that all Americans should have. People who live on tribal lands lag behind the rest of the nation in access to high-speed Internet and other advanced telecommunications services, despite several federal programs designed to improve access in rural areas, including tribal lands. This is frustrating because Indian tribes could benefit greatly from greater access to high-speed Internet in critical areas such as cultural preservation, public safety, economic development, and improved education and health care. This letter lays out areas of study that will help this Committee find solutions to better address the lack of access to high-speed Internet on tribal lands.

The National Broadband Map: The National Broadband Map was created by the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), and is now managed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). It is an important tool for understanding the gaps in high speed Internet in America, and as such, its reliability is critical. The Map is used by policy leaders to understand the availability of broadband Internet across the country and as criteria for distributing federal assistance. Since its inception, Indian tribes and local communities have found that the Broadband Map does not always accurately reflect Internet availability on their lands. Inaccurate data can frustrate Tribes and prevent them from accessing federal programs for which they should qualify. Therefore, the Committee seeks research and analysis to the questions below.

1. What is the status of the transition of the National Broadband Map from the NTIA to FCC?
2. How does the FCC collect, validate, and use broadband availability data, and how does this data feed the National Broadband Map?
3. What unique challenges does FCC face in ensuring the accuracy of the National Broadband Map on tribal lands and what steps has it taken to address them?
4. How can stakeholders, including large, mid-size, and small service providers, local governments, Indian tribes and individuals, challenge National Broadband Map data?

5. How can the FCC improve the collection of data so we may better understand how native communities and tribal lands are being served by each of the four universal service programs within the universal service fund (Connect America Fund, Schools and Libraries (E-Rate), Lifeline, and Rural Health Care)?
6. According to the FCC's 2016 Broadband Report, 41 percent of household on tribal lands do not have broadband available to them. What is the percentage of community anchor institutions like schools, libraries and health care facilities that have broadband availability on tribal lands?
7. What is the percent of households that subscribe to broadband on tribal lands?
8. What is the percent of schools, libraries and health care facilities that subscribe to broadband service on tribal lands?
9. What experiences have Indian tribes had with public-private partnerships in the telecommunication field and what lessons have they learned?
10. What federal programs are offered to support public-private partnerships to increase advanced telecommunications services on tribal lands, and how well are they coordinated?
11. What are the challenges to public-private partnerships in providing broadband on tribal lands and what has been done to address them?

Radio Frequency Spectrum Over Tribal Lands: Wireless technologies can offer more cost effective ways to bring high-speed Internet to remote tribal lands by providing a middle mile bridge between providers' main data and cellular networks and remote villages. However, these wireless links require spectrum licenses to ensure interference-free signal transmission. Recognizing that wireless access is lagging on tribal lands, FCC established the Tribal Land Bidding Credit program to provide incentives to qualified entities with licenses for spectrum to deploy advanced voice and data services on underserved tribal lands.

1. What are the challenges for Indian tribes and enterprises in obtaining or accessing spectrum to provide broadband services?
2. How does FCC track and enforce the use of spectrum over tribal lands?
3. How many credits has FCC issued from the Tribal Land Bidding Credit program and to what extent has the program improved access?
4. As a result of FCC's spectrum regulations, what are the advantages and disadvantages to Indian tribes?

We look forward to working with you on these critical issues to improve access to high-speed internet on tribal lands. If you have any questions about our request, please contact Natasha John at Natasha_John@indian.senate.gov, (202)-224-2251.

Sincerely,

John Barrasso, M.D.
Chairman
Committee on Indian Affairs

Jon Tester
Vice Chairman
Committee on Indian Affairs

John McCain
United States Senator

Maria Cantwell
United States Senator

Steve Daines
United States Senator

Heidi Heitkamp
United States Senator

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United States Senator