

NM faces huge digital divide despite investments

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — New Mexico faces a huge digital divide even though its rural areas have benefited from roughly \$400 million in broadband development in recent years.

The U.S. Agriculture Department's rural development director for New Mexico tells The Albuquerque Journal (<http://bit.ly/13eBvCf>) that many of the state's rural zones still have no Internet coverage, and many that do are still using dial-up modems or aging DSL technology.

"We have a long way to go nationally in developing broadband, but New Mexico is further behind than other states," said USDA Rural Development State Director Terry Brunner. "New Mexico has some of the slowest speeds in the nation and in the West for sure."

New Mexico received more than \$200 million in federal stimulus funding to extend high-speed Internet in rural areas. If matching dollars from telephone companies that won stimulus grants are included, plus development loans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, broadband investments in the past five years surpass \$400 million, according to the state Department of Information Technology.

The lack of digital access in certain areas of the state plays a critical impediment to economic stability.

New Mexico faces more hurdles than many other states in building remote connectivity because of its vast rural nature. The Exchange Carriers Group, for example, provides telecommunications service to 77,000

square miles of territory, with an average of 2.2 customers per mile.

Such broad distances and low population densities make digital infrastructure expensive to install, preventing many commercial providers from laying fiber optics or other broadband technology without government assistance.

"New Mexico still has a digital divide because in some areas it's just so hard to go through mountains or rock formations, and then you get to the end of the route and find there just aren't enough homes and businesses to pay for the construction," said Valerie Dodd, CenturyLink Inc.'s vice president and general manager for New Mexico.

In addition, poverty and a lack of understanding about the benefits of Internet access often discourage many rural residents from paying for services even when broadband is available.

As a result, New Mexico ranked 46th in the nation for broadband use in the 2010 U.S. census. Only 53 percent of residents here said they access broadband at home, compared with 80 percent nationally.

Federal money continues to flow to New Mexico.

The Federal Communications Commission awarded \$2.3 million last summer to CenturyLink and Windstream Communications to extend broadband access in rural areas. And, in December, it approved \$15.4 million for the University of New Mexico's Center for Telehealth, San Juan Regional Medical Center and Presbyterian Healthcare Systems to jointly build a rural telehealth broadband network.

Information from: Albuquerque Journal, <http://www.abqjournal.com>