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Thank you so much Chairwoman Haaland and members of the Subcommittee for allowing me to speak with you today.

My name is Connie Stewart and I am the Executive Director of the California Center for Rural Policy at Humboldt State University. At the Center, we recognize the importance of broadband to rural communities, which is why since our inception in 2005 we have worked to improve broadband deployment, policy and adoption.

I am here to urge you to support Congressman Huffman's HR 2611 the "Public Lands Telecommunication Act" and I would like to thank Congressman Huffman for introducing this important legislation.

If enacted, HR 2611 will make a big difference in helping rural communities working on deploying broadband out West to end the digital divide. I also believe it will be a relief to federal employees attempting to review and permit projects.

Rural communities have been begging for broadband and a lot of funding has been dedicated to improving service. COVID-19 has shown us the importance of universal broadband and how many communities are still in need. Money alone is not going to solve the problem. Systems need to change as well.

Why are so many rural communities still without broadband? Well, today let me focus on three problems:

- The lack of reliable backhaul, especially those in areas with lots of Federal Lands.
- The process and cost of federal permitting, especially if there are multiple Federal Land Management Agencies in the region. and;
- The difficulty collaborating with federal agencies to purchase local broadband services to improve connectivity opportunities for visitors to our federal parks and forests.

Congressman Huffman's Public Lands Telecommunications Act (HR2611), is an important step in solving all three of these problems and enhancing service in rural communities across the country.

In 2007, California created an Advanced Services Fund administered by the Public Utilities Commission to provide grants to bridge the "digital divide" in unserved and underserved areas, which are mostly in rural communities.

In 2009, our region created a plan to build a fiber middle-mile backbone system that could offer reliable service to any of the 100 communities in our region. The reason we have focused on building a fiber middle mile is to create a telecommunication infrastructure foundation with the capacity to effectively adapt to future needs and promote economic development.

I had the honor of testifying before this Committee on this bill in the last Congressional Session. Let me briefly give the Committee an update to illustrate the importance of HR 2611:

Just to explain how complicated providing services out West can be, let me mention a successful broadband project --Digital 395, which is a fiber optic network between Barstow, CA and Carson City, NV. The project encompassed 36 rural and remote communities, six Indian reservations, two military bases, over 25,000 households and 2,500 businesses.

\$23 million dollars of the \$109 million dollar project went to permitting, right-of-way fees, and mitigation and environmental studies. There were 54 agencies involved in permitting,

including—three separate Bureau of Land Management offices, Bureau of Indian Affairs in two states on behalf of seven Tribes, US Forest Service in two separate forests and the Department of Defense for two separate military bases. The Federal Resource Management Agencies involved included US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Army Corps of Engineers.

To quote the President of the company that built the project, “The permit process, although not contested by even one intervener, took 24 months to complete, while the construction took only 17 months. Therein lies some empirical proof that the permitting bureaucracy is more difficult to penetrate than granite.” As I said before, broadband deployment near federal lands is complicated.

Now, let me turn to a couple of projects that to date, have not been lucky enough to get through the permitting process. We remain hopeful of approval soon.

In 2013, the Karuk and Yurok Tribes received a grant from the state’s Advanced Services Fund to provide broadband to some of the largest unserved Tribal communities in the State of California. They have spent seven years working on permitting and environmental studies! Just to be clear, this is not an issue of bad people or bad agencies. I am not here to object to environmental review; it is just that the current process to review broadband deployment is extremely inefficient.

Every time one agency asks for a project change, another agency may have new issues with their part of the review. In addition, none of the agencies has funding for such complicated projects. How could things take seven years? Here are just a few reasons:

- It took one year to get an agency to grant the Tribes a permit to begin the cultural study;
- It took two years to get another agency to assign staff to engage in the NEPA process;
- Some federal agencies can engage in the NEPA process and issue permits at a regional level. However, other federal agencies need approval from the Washington DC office;
- The cost rose significantly due to requested project changes discovered during the NEPA process, which required the Tribes to delay to seek additional funding;
- Most staff in these agencies had never permitted a major fiber build and leaned on the side of extreme caution; and
- Over the years, staff had changed. The Tribes have resorted to annual meetings with all of the Federal partners to keep the project moving forward.

The Tribes have budgeted nearly \$2 million dollars of this \$25 million project to complete permitting.

I am sure that HR 2611 would have made a difference in the time and cost of this project. HR 2611 has provisions providing fee retention authority to the Interior Department land management agencies to ensure funds are invested to further broadband and telecommunications deployment. Having the cooperative agreement authority the legislation provides would help speed up things considerably.

The other project we are working on in my region is Digital 299, a 221-mile fiber build which will provide backhaul and connect as many as 102 schools, colleges, research institutions, hospitals, clinics, public safety, tribal lands, and other community anchor institutions. The project area covers almost 2,400 square miles of rural Northern California between Redding and the California coast, an area the size of New Jersey and Connecticut and will help provide broadband service to more than 25,000 people.

It received funding in 2015, and to date the internet provider has spent nearly \$4 million on design, permitting and environmental review. It has experienced similar problems to the Tribal project and now needs almost double the amount of funding because of delays.

Without HR2611, many rural and remote projects will likely experience similar challenges. Rural communities surrounded by federal lands will not have the broadband they need for emergency services, education, health care and economic development.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to testify today.

Mrs. Chairwoman, with your permission I am submitting my entire statement for the record and I am happy to answer any questions. Thank you.