

WHITE PAPER RECAP

MAPPING PROSPERITY: A FLAWED METHOD OF EVALUATING NEBRASKA'S BROADBAND ACCESS

SUMMARY

Connectivity is the defining aspect of our 21st century economy. Access to broadband internet in all corners of Nebraska is essential for rural economic development. Unfortunately, an inaccurate method of reporting and mapping access to broadband services has led to thousands of Nebraska's rural households being left behind. Improved mapping is the most important step we can take to make broadband available to all Nebraskans.



THE PROBLEM WITH MAPPING

The information many states rely on to determine who does and does not have broadband access is collected through FCC Form 477. This is a required twice-per-year update from internet service providers (ISPs) that summarizes the Census blocks¹ they serve or could reasonably serve. This data collection method results in misleading information. Some challenges include:

- **If the ISP reports service to one household in a Census block, the entire block is counted as served—even if other households have no ability to gain access.**
- Census blocks can be marked as “served” even when no households have access. This is because an ISP could report a block as served without an “extraordinary commitment of resources”—a term with no official definition.

Broadband defined

In 2015, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) upgraded the definition of broadband speed to 25 megabits per second (Mbps) for content download and 3 Mbps for content upload.



DID YOU KNOW?

- There are more than **3,200** Census blocks in the U.S. larger than Washington, D.C., and **eight** are larger than the entire state of Connecticut.
- There are **11,078,297** Census blocks total.

This flawed method leaves rural Nebraskans out. Many rural households may be reported to the FCC as having access to broadband without actually having the ability to complete their education, talk to a doctor remotely, or grow their business.

As a result, Nebraska struggles to invest its limited resources for broadband expansion strategically. Data collected through FCC Form 477 does not accurately measure their ability to gain access to broadband connection. Collecting this information on a Census block scale is a problem for rural areas, many of which fall into expansive Census blocks.

¹ Census blocks are statistical areas used by the U.S. Census Bureau to gather a variety of information.



SOLUTIONS

To paint a clearer, more accurate picture of where there is and is not broadband access, other states have adopted innovative policy solutions that provide hope for rural areas of Nebraska.

1 Improved broadband mapping

- Require that data collection take place anonymously at the street address or parcel level.
- OR, require granular data only on Census blocks **over** a certain size.
 - > Data collection on a smaller scale could increase the accuracy of the information and paint a clearer picture of where broadband service is available.
- Define “extraordinary commitment of resources” and standardize.
- Require houses that are expected to be served be delineated separately.
 - > Currently, this vague term allows service providers to report areas as served, even if no households have access. Creating a standardized definition could resolve this disconnect.

2 Investments in infrastructure, regional partnerships, and community-based grantmaking

- These investments could help establish a comprehensive program that reports access more accurately.

3 Minnesota’s Border-to-Border Broadband Development Grant Program

- Every Minnesotan will have access to broadband by 2026.
- Makes grants available to providers willing to expand service to underserved/unserved areas of the state.
- Grant dollars are paired with required matches to offset upfront costs of infrastructure for fiber optic, cable, fixed wireless, and Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) technologies.



DID YOU KNOW?

> **2 percent, or 253,295**, Census blocks exceed 2 square miles



→ Since 2014,
\$85 million invested
resulting in access to:
3,852 households,
5,189 businesses, and
300 community institutions.

VIEW THE ENTIRE WHITE PAPER:

“Map to Prosperity,” a white paper published in 2018 by Johnathan Hladik and the Center for Rural Affairs, can be found at cfra.org/publications/MapToProsperity.

