

Senator Ben Ray Luján

Hearing: “Oversight of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration”

Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband

June 9, 2022

Opening Statement

I call to order a hearing before the Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband, on “Oversight of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.” I want to thank Ranking Member Thune for joining this hearing. And thank you to Administrator Davidson for your willingness to provide testimony.

The last time Senate Commerce heard testimony from anyone at NTIA was June 13, 2018 – nearly four years ago. The years since have transformed our understanding of broadband, telecommunications, and the promise of technology. In New Mexico and all across the nation, work, school, health care, and connecting with loved ones moved online faster than we could have ever anticipated. This shift highlighted how dangerous and disadvantageous the lack of access to high-speed broadband can be.

New Mexico families know the difference between fast internet, slow internet, and no internet at all. As a nation, we will no longer tolerate stories of working families unable to access work, of students forced to drive miles just to do their homework in a McDonald’s parking lot, of patients cut off from essential health services.

Congress recognized this, and in a bipartisan manner, we acted to fix it. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act made a \$65 billion investment to expand broadband access, affordability, and access. This is the single greatest investment to expand broadband infrastructure we have made as a nation.

Congress chose the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to oversee the majority of these ambitious goals. However, NTIA’s responsibilities range far beyond broadband access.

As the coordinator for the federal government’s use of spectrum, NTIA manages federal participation in a limited and valuable public resource, critical for aviation, defense, and scientific discovery. Effectively managing federal spectrum is essential to ensuring Americans have access to emergency services, telecommunications devices, and – in many cases, – access to broadband at home. NTIA also plays a critical role in public safety, supporting FirstNet, Next Generation 9-1-1, and our nation’s first responders.

Administrator Davidson has already proven that he is well equipped to lead NTIA during this historic moment, and I look forward to his testimony. In this capacity, I have three points I want to urge Administrator Davidson to consider as we begin the first Senate oversight hearing of NTIA during the 117th Congress.

First, NTIA must stay focused on closing the digital divide for all Americans.

Broadband **access** relies on both **availability** and **adoption**. For some communities, affordability has been – and will remain – the most pressing obstacle for ensuring adoption. For others, ensuring availability through high-quality future-proof fiber is the solution. And for others, deployment of wireless technology capable across challenging terrain must be prioritized. No **single** solution is going to work for **all** Americans, and I am glad that Administrator Davidson recognizes that.

Second, NTIA must work closely with the FCC, USDA, OMB, and other agencies to accomplish its mission. BEAD is the newest, but there are 133 federal programs administered across 15 agencies that support broadband access.

Administrator Davidson, your leadership is guiding the Administration toward developing a cohesive broadband strategy. NTIA – in coordination with the Office of the President – has a responsibility to ensure that the Executive Branch effectively presents its priorities for tech and telecom to Congress. We’ve seen the risks when internal conflict offsets progress and coordination breaks down. Spectrum management, mapping, affordability – each of these priorities require NTIA to be an effective partner with Congress and its sister agencies and an effective leader within the Executive Branch.

Third, NTIA must ensure investments in connectivity are made efficiently and in the best interests of the communities they serve. NTIA’s mission is to support secure, private, free, and open communications is critical for protecting consumers. Industry has made significant private investment to close the digital divide. Despite the federal government’s many programs to provide broadband access, we continue to fall short. Digital equity is essential. We must do more in rural areas, Tribal nations, and in urban areas with a history of digital redlining. In a report released just last week, GAO recommended NTIA identify key statutory provisions that limit the reach of broadband programs. NTIA should offer legislative proposals to address those limitations.

I look forward to continuing to work with Administrator Davidson as this report is developed and to clear any hurdles standing in the way of a comprehensive telecommunications strategy, including both broadband and spectrum.

The programs you are administering are championed by many members of this Subcommittee on both sides of the aisle. I want to thank Administrator Davidson for continuing to work with us to identify challenges and find solutions.

This is our chance to get this right, to close the digital divide, and to have a lasting impact on the prosperity, health, and wellbeing of our nation. Without effective administration by NTIA, we will not reach that goal.

And with that, I will turn to Ranking Member Thune for his opening statement.