Telecommunications

While tribal communities still lag behind the rest of the United States in access to radio, wireless, and broadband services, tribes made remarkable gains in telecommunication policy in 2010: tribal priorities were included in the National Broadband Plan and tribes received priority access to broadcast licensing. These gains are a critical foundation for meaningful participation in future broadband and telecommunications policy. With the current low rate of telephone, radio, and broadband service in tribal communities, the following recommendations will provide funding to increase access to telecommunications services throughout Indian Country.
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION (FCC)

Financial Services Appropriations Bill

Office of Native Affairs and Policy
• Provide $1.5 million to fund the newly created Office of Native Affairs and Policy.

Funding for the newly established Office of Native Affairs and Policy will allow the FCC to conduct long overdue outreach and consultation with the 565 federally recognized tribes. Due to the remoteness of many tribal lands and the uniqueness of individual tribal communities, it is important that the FCC hear directly from tribes to better understand and respond to their concerns. Tribal leaders need to have ongoing communication with the FCC; the Office of Native Affairs and Policy has the potential to provide this much needed access and attention.

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations Bill

Public Telecommunications Facilities Program
• Appropriate $4 million for construction of American Indian radio stations through the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program.

Continued funding of the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program (PTFP) will ensure enhanced radio station infrastructure for tribal communities. Radio stations are critical anchor institutions that deliver public safety announcements and programming for American Indians. Tribes depend on funding from the PTFP for the construction and upkeep of their radio stations. Thirty-four tribes have received funding from this program and 38 others have submitted applications and obtained construction permits for future stations.

CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Labor, Health and Human Services, Education Appropriations Bill

Grant Programs
• Appropriate $5 million for funding American Indian radio stations.

While other communities—particularly urban communities—have myriad options for accessing radio programming, many Native communities rely heavily on a single radio station as the most effective medium for receiving news about weather conditions, traffic issues, available services, evacuations, and emergencies. Appropriating funds to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) will provide much needed support for American Indian stations. Currently, 28 tribal stations receive funding from the CPB; without this financial support the stations could not operate.
Broadband access is less than 10 percent on Indian reservations, and many reservations have less than 50 percent coverage of basic telephone service. To ensure the Administration’s commitment to nationwide broadband access, USDA Rural Development needs to work with tribes to improve telecommunications service to tribal communities. This can be accomplished through funding increases in the Rural Business Enterprise Grants program and the new broadband fund established in Section 6110 of the Farm Bill. This new fund, authorized at $25 million, provides loans and loan guarantees for the development of broadband service in rural areas, with priority to areas with no incumbent providers.