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Expanding Broadband Internet Access in Mountainous States

The purpose of this report is to compile and analyze what different states have done to bring broadband internet to unserved and underserved areas, with an emphasis on mountainous states. In this report we use the federal definitions for “broadband,” “unserved,” and “underserved” that are laid out in Title 47 of the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations.

“Broadband” is defined as:

Broadband internet access service is a mass-market retail service by wire or radio that provides the capability to transmit data to and receive data from all or substantially all internet endpoints, including any capabilities that are incidental to and enable the operation of the communications service, but excluding dial-up internet access service.¹

This definition encompasses both fixed broadband, internet connection that is delivered to a consumer via cable or fiber, and mobile broadband, which is delivered via smartphone through the consumer’s phone plan.

“Unserved” is defined as:

A broadband serviceable location, as determined in accordance with the broadband data maps that has no access to broadband service, or lacks reliable broadband service offered with (I) a speed of not less than 25 megabits per second for downloads and 3 megabits per second for uploads, or (II) lacks a latency sufficient to support real-time, interactive applications.²

“Underserved” is defined as:

A location that is not an unserved location and as determined in accordance with the broadband data maps, lacks access to reliable broadband service offered with (I) a speed of not less than 100 megabits per second for downloads and 20

¹ 47 U.S.C. § 8.1, <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-47/chapter-I/subchapter-A/part-8/subpart-A>.

² 47 U.S.C. § 1702, <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid%3AUSC-prelim-title47-chapter16&saved=%7CKHRpdGxIOjQ3IHNIY3Rpb246MTc0MSBIZGl0aW9uOnByZWxpbSk%3D%7C%7C%7C0%7Cfalse%7Cprelim&edition=prelim>.

megabits per second for uploads, and (II) lacks a latency sufficient to support real-time, interactive applications.³

Federal Legislation and Programs

A 2025 Congressional Research Service report summarizes and explains all federal legislation and programs regarding universal service and Federal Communications Commission (FCC) broadband programs.⁴ The Universal Service Fund was established alongside the Communications Act of 1934 to serve as a mechanism to monitor telephone service to low-income households and high-cost areas.⁵ It was expanded with the Telecommunications Act of 1996, and seeks to provide affordable telephone service to rural health care providers and eligible schools and libraries in addition to low-income households and high-cost areas.⁶ The Universal Service Fund executes this support through four programs; the High-Cost Support Mechanism, the Low-Income Support Mechanism, Rural Health Care Support Mechanism, and the Schools and Libraries Support Mechanism.⁷

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) houses the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program, which was created by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in November 2021.⁸ BEAD has allocated more than \$40 billion for the expansion of high-speed internet access across the states.⁹ The BEAD program uses the FCC's National Broadband Map to determine a state's share of the funding.¹⁰ Each state is given a baseline of \$100 million, and then additional funding is allocated for the number of "high-cost" locations it has.¹¹ High-cost areas include those with topographic obstacles that may increase the cost and ease of deploying or expanding broadband internet services.¹²

The BEAD program was paused and updated by the Trump Administration in June 2025, requiring all states to reconduct their proposals within 90 days.¹³ A July 2025 National

³ 47 U.S.C. § 1702.

⁴ Patricia Moloney Figliola, *The Universal Service Fund and Related FCC Broadband Programs: Overview and Considerations for Congress*, July 1, 2025, Congressional Research Service, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47621>.

⁵ *Communications Act of 1934*, 47 U.S.C. 151.

⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Telecommunications Act of 1996*, S.B. 652, 104th Congress, <https://transition.fcc.gov/Reports/tcom1996.pdf>.

⁷ Figliola, *The Universal Service Fund and Related FCC Broadband Programs*.

⁸ U.S. Congress, House, *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*, P.L. 117-58, 117th Congress, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3684>.

⁹ National Telecommunications and Information Administration, "Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program," accessed November 5, 2025, <https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/funding-programs/broadband-equity-access-and-deployment-bead-program>.

¹⁰ Federal Communications Commission, *National Broadband Map*, accessed November 5, 2025, <https://broadbandmap.fcc.gov/home>.

¹¹ National Telecommunications and Information Administration, "BEAD Allocation Methodology," accessed November 5, 2025, <https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/bead-allocation-methodology>.

¹² National Telecommunications and Information Administration, "BEAD Allocation Methodology."

¹³ Anna Pope, "A look at the latest effort to get more Americans in rural communities online," National Public Radio, November 8, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/11/08/nx-s1-5575723/a-look-at-the-latest-effort-to-get-more-americans-in-rural-communities-online>.

Conference of State Legislatures brief explains the update and its implications for the states.¹⁴ The original definition of broadband projects under the Notice of Funding Opportunities limited states to using BEAD funding for fiber technologies.¹⁵ The funding can now be used for any type of broadband technology so long as they meet the same speed and latency requirements. Additionally, the new policy rescinds all non-deployment-related funding allocations (i.e. digital equity programs) and eliminates BEAD-specific labor requirements.¹⁶ This update could delay the timeline for the dispersal of BEAD funding.¹⁷ The NTIA has not specified when BEAD funding will be delivered to the states.

Other NTIA programs include the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program, which has been allocated \$3 billion to distribute in the form of grants for the expansion of broadband services on tribal lands.¹⁸ Additionally, the Broadband Infrastructure Program provided funding to states and counties to improve broadband connectivity.¹⁹ The program favored deploying funding to rural areas and allocated over \$280 million for the project.²⁰

The Rural Utilities Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, also administers programs intended to promote broadband deployment, accessibility, and use.²¹ The agency provides financing for the improvement of broadband infrastructure in rural communities through several programs. The Rural Digital Opportunity Fund sought to bring fixed broadband services to rural homes and small businesses.²² Funding was allocated through competitive reverse auctions, a mechanism that awards funds to broadband companies that commit to deploying services at the lowest possible cost.²³ Additionally, the 5G fund for Rural America, which was adopted in 2020, distributes funding for the purpose of bringing voice and broadband services to areas that are unlikely to see unsubsidized deployment of 5G networks.²⁴ The Broadband Deployment Accuracy and Technological Availability Act determines funding for

¹⁴ National Conference of State Legislatures, “BEAD Rewired: What the Changes to the Broadband Program Mean for States,” accessed November 10, 2025, <https://www.ncsl.org/technology-and-communication/bead-rewired-what-the-changes-to-the-broadband-program-mean-for-states>.

¹⁵ National Telecommunications and Information Administration, *Notice of Funding Opportunity Executive Summary*, May 2022, <https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/BEAD%20NOFO.pdf>.

¹⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures, “BEAD Rewired: What the Changes to the Broadband Program Mean for States.”

¹⁷ National Conference of State Legislatures, “BEAD Rewired: What the Changes to the Broadband Program Mean for States.”

¹⁸ National Telecommunications and Information Administration, “Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program,” accessed November 5, 2025, <https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/funding-programs/tribal-broadband-connectivity>.

¹⁹ National Telecommunications and Information Administration, “Broadband Infrastructure Program,” accessed November 4, 2025, <https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/funding-programs/broadband-infrastructure-program>.

²⁰ National Telecommunications and Information Administration, “Broadband Infrastructure Program”.

²¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, “About the Rural Utilities Service,” accessed November 4, 2025, <https://www.rd.usda.gov/about-rd/agencies/rural-utilities-service>.

²² Federal Communications Commission, “Rural Digital Opportunity Fund,” accessed November 4, 2025, <https://www.fcc.gov/auction/904>.

²³ Congressional Research Service, *The Universal Service Fund and Related FCC Broadband Programs: Overview and Considerations for Congress*, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47621>.

²⁴ Federal Communications Commission, “5G Fund,” accessed November 5, 2025, <https://www.fcc.gov/5g-fund>.

this program using data from the FCC’s National Broadband map to determine eligibility status.²⁵

Vermont Broadband Deployment Status

Vermont, along with all 56 states and territories, has been allocated funding by the NTIA through the BEAD program.²⁶ The state’s final implementation plan, which manages over \$200 million from BEAD, is awaiting approval from the NTIA.²⁷ So far in the process, Vermont has complied with all the NTIA’s 16 requirements including, but not limited to establishing oversight and accountability processes, complying with labor laws, and gaining consent from tribal entities.²⁸

The state intends to use BEAD funding to serve all remaining unserved and underserved areas by distributing grants to several telecommunications providers: Comcast, Consolidated Communications, DVFiber, Maple Broadband, NEK Broadband, SpaceX, and Vermont Telephone.²⁹ Following the successful implementation of the VT-BEAD program, the Vermont Community Broadband Board will use the remaining funds for BEAD-eligible uses such as Workforce Development to improve digital literacy, Vermont Air National Guard internet services, and improving Precision Agriculture.³⁰ The state’s implementation plan intends to provide high-speed, reliable broadband coverage to 97% of the state.³¹

Other State Legislation and Programs

All 50 states have enacted legislation regarding the expansion of broadband internet. Using the National Conference of State Legislature’s Broadband Legislation Database and information from individual state agencies, we have compiled the broadband expansion goals, policies, and timelines of several other mountainous states.³² We focus on information regarding navigating topographical obstacles, alternative infrastructure solutions, and implementation plans with the purpose of expanding broadband internet to mountain communities. Our research concludes that

²⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Broadband Data Act*, S.B. 1822, 116th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1822/text>.

²⁶ National Telecommunications and Information Administration, “Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program,” accessed November 5, 2025, <https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/funding-programs/broadband-equity-access-and-deployment-bead-program>.

²⁷ State of Vermont, “Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program,” accessed November 5, 2025, <https://publicservice.vermont.gov/vermont-community-broadband-board-vcbb/broadband-equity-access-and-deployment-program>.

²⁸ Vermont Community Broadband Board, *Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program Final Proposal*, September 22, 2025, <https://publicservice.vermont.gov/sites/dps/files/documents/VT-BEAD%20Final%20Proposal%20VCBB%20as%20submitted%2009.22.25.pdf>.

²⁹ Vermont Community Broadband Board, “VCBB Releases Plan to Finish Vermont’s Broadband Buildout,” August 28, 2025, [https://uvmoffice.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/Section_202509-93660/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc=%7BF5DFB4E1-E482-4CA9-9FD6-6ED28D48E0F0%7D&file=VT-BEAD%20Final%20Proposal%20Draft%20Released%20\(1\).docx&action=default&mobileredirect=true](https://uvmoffice.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/Section_202509-93660/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc=%7BF5DFB4E1-E482-4CA9-9FD6-6ED28D48E0F0%7D&file=VT-BEAD%20Final%20Proposal%20Draft%20Released%20(1).docx&action=default&mobileredirect=true).

³⁰ Vermont Community Broadband Board, *Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program Final Proposal*.

³¹ Vermont Community Broadband Board, “VCBB Releases Plan to Finish Vermont’s Broadband Buildout.”

³² National Conference of State Legislatures, *Broadband Legislation Database*, accessed November 5, 2025, <https://www.ncsl.org/technology-and-communication/broadband-legislation-database>.

states employ two main strategies to increase broadband internet access; applying for and distributing federal grants like BEAD and creating tax incentives for telecommunications companies.

Alaska

In 2022, the Alaska State Legislature passed House Bill 363, creating the Alaska Broadband Office to monitor the deployment of reliable and affordable internet services across the state.³³ Additionally, the same bill created the Broadband Parity Fund, which offsets the cost of broadband internet for customers in high-cost areas.³⁴ The state has been allocated over \$1 billion from BEAD and their 5-year implementation plan was approved by the NTIA in 2023.³⁵ The plan indicates topography as a significant obstacle the state faces in the deployment of broadband internet to underserved and unserved locations.³⁶ Topographical features like mountains and ice formations increase the cost of installing broadband infrastructure, yet the plan still ensures “full geographic coverage.”³⁷

As outlined in the BEAD five-year plan, Alaska does not own any of their own broadband infrastructure, nor do they plan to deploy any. Therefore, the responsibility falls on individual telecommunications service companies to utilize federal and state funding, most of which will come from BEAD, to mitigate the obstacles of expanding broadband access in mountainous terrain.³⁸ The state submitted its final BEAD proposal in October 2025 and is currently awaiting review.³⁹

Colorado

The Colorado Broadband Office was created within the Governor’s Office of Information Technology 2016 to oversee broadband activity statewide.⁴⁰ The state has been allocated over \$800 million from BEAD for the purposes of expanding broadband internet access and is awaiting final approval from the NTIA.⁴¹ The state intends to prioritize fiber connections yet acknowledges that “creative solutions” may be necessary to ensure access in mountain communities.⁴²

³³ State of Alaska, H.B. 363, § 44.33.910 (2022), <https://www.akleg.gov/PDF/32/Bills/HB0363Z.PDF>.

³⁴ A.S. § 44.33.915.

³⁵ Alaska Broadband Office, “Program Overviews and Timelines,” accessed November 4, 2025, <https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/abo/ProgramOverviewsandTimelines>.

³⁶ Alaska Broadband Office, *State of Alaska Five-Year Action Plan*, September 11, 2023, https://www.commerce.alaska.gov/web/Portals/19/pub/Alaska%E2%80%99s-BEAD-Five-Year-Action-Plan.pdf?ver=eMRubmFcS9zPw_RzJ6C4Zw%3d%3d.

³⁷ Alaska Broadband Office, *State of Alaska Five-Year Action Plan*.

³⁸ Alaska Broadband Office, *State of Alaska Five-Year Action Plan*.

³⁹ Alaska Broadband Office, “Program Overviews and Timelines.”

⁴⁰ Colorado Broadband Office, “About the Colorado Broadband Office,” accessed November 4, 2025, <https://broadband.colorado.gov/about-the-colorado-broadband-office>.

⁴¹ Colorado Broadband Office, “BEAD Program,” accessed November 4, 2025, <https://broadband.colorado.gov/category/bead-program>.

⁴² Colorado Governor’s Office of Information Technology, “Colorado Among the First to Implement Historic Broadband Investment,” accessed November 4, 2025, <https://oit.colorado.gov/press-release/colorado-among-the-first-to-implement-historic-broadband-investment>.

When originally applying for BEAD funding in 2023, the state successfully challenged many of the FCC national broadband map designations to increase the grants allocated to high-cost areas like mountain communities.⁴³ Additionally, a 2024 bill authorized the Colorado Broadband Office to award funding from the state’s High-Cost Support Mechanism to invest in high-cost areas.⁴⁴ This program implemented a 2.6% surcharge on all consumer purchases of wireless and internet technologies across the state.⁴⁵ The charge, which accumulated to over \$20 million in 2022, is then distributed in the form of state and private infrastructure investments.⁴⁶ A 2023 Sunset Review conducted by the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies found that this strategy has been successful at increasing investment in middle-mile infrastructure and fiber networks and recommends continuation.⁴⁷ As of 2024, 75.2% of rural households in Colorado have access to reliable broadband internet.⁴⁸

Colorado employs several tax refund and exemption programs aimed at incentivizing telecommunications providers to expand their services to underserved and unserved areas. For example, in 2024, the state legislature extended the Rural Broadband Equipment and Use Tax Refund.⁴⁹ It is worth noting that a 2022 report from the Colorado Office of the State Auditor recommended the discontinuation of this program as no providers had qualified for it since its creation in 2014.⁵⁰ A more recent bill updating state tax policy exempts telecommunications providers from paying sales or use tax on wireless or communications services to “ease the administrative burden on communications providers that apply for the existing rebate program.”⁵¹

Maine

In 2021, the Maine State Legislature enacted legislation that established the Maine Connectivity Authority. Funded by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the goal of the Maine Connectivity Authority is to expand broadband to every part of the state and support the creation of forward-

⁴³ Colorado Broadband Office, “2023 Year in Review,” 2024, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EU_oNty-kv1GN6BJqFunM1hPyk3s3kG_/view.

⁴⁴ State of Colorado, H.B. 1336, § 24-37.5-905 (2024), https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2024a_1336_signed.pdf.

⁴⁵ Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, “Colorado High Cost Support Mechanism (HCSM),” accessed November 4, 2025, <https://puc.colorado.gov/hcsm>.

⁴⁶ Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, *2023 Sunset Review: High Cost Support Mechanism*, October 13, 2023, <file:///Users/annarich/Downloads/reg122h532023internet.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, *2023 Sunset Review: High Cost Support Mechanism*.

⁴⁸ Colorado Broadband Office, “2024 Year in Review,” 2025, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nYOFm_kFlgKK4nVRVr1ZGyqPK_MH8XBR/view.

⁴⁹ State of Colorado, H.B. 1036, § 39-26-129 (2024), https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/2024a_1036_signed.pdf.

⁵⁰ Colorado Office of the State Auditor, *Rural Broadband Equipment Refund Evaluation Summary*, July, 2022, https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/te_30_rural_broadband_equipment_refund.pdf.

⁵¹ State of Colorado, H.B. 1080, § 39-3-139 (2025), https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:CO2025000H1080&ciq=urn:user:PA193501911&client_md=f908bb6fb85a9c9a7247a9ca8aea30ce&mode=current_text.

looking broadband infrastructure that can support future needs.⁵² Maine has been allocated \$272 million from BEAD and is awaiting final approval by the NTIA.⁵³ In their five-year action plan, the Maine Connectivity Authority acknowledges that Maine’s “remote and rugged terrain” make it challenging to establish broadband infrastructure.⁵⁴ Additionally, in 2021 Maine enacted legislation that requires that 33% of sales and use tax revenue from marketplace facilitators must be transferred to the ConnectMaine Authority to help deploy broadband infrastructure to underserved and unserved areas of the state.⁵⁵

In 2023, the Maine State Legislature enacted legislation that directed the Maine Public Utilities Commission, the Maine Connectivity Authority, and the Interagency Broadband Working Group to conduct a comprehensive study of existing pole attachment laws and their impact on broadband expansion across Maine. Using existing data available from the electronic pole attachment management system, the study will estimate how many utility poles statewide can accommodate new municipal attachments without needing replacement.⁵⁶ The study will also evaluate the effectiveness of the Maine Public Utilities Commission’s enforcement practices regarding the removal or relocation of obsolete poles, particularly those that obstruct municipal infrastructure.⁵⁷ This legislation will allow the Maine Public Utilities Commission, the Maine Connectivity Authority, and the Interagency Broadband Working Group to find the most efficient way to expand broadband access across the state.

Finally, in 2024 Maine enacted legislation that requires broadband service providers to provide a rebate for customers whose connection is interrupted for more than 6 hours in one billing period. The bill notes that providers must include a notice on each customer’s bill regarding the customer’s right to a rebate.⁵⁸

New Hampshire

Following a similar path to Vermont, New Hampshire submitted their five-year BEAD implementation plan in 2024, after being allocated \$196 million for the expansion of broadband internet.⁵⁹ Their five-year plan cites “rugged terrain” and “seasonal weather” as factors that could

⁵² State of Maine, L.D. 1484, “The Connectivity Infrastructure Act,” § 9401-9410 (2021), <https://legislature.maine.gov/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=SP0477&item=4&snum=130>.

⁵³ Maine Connectivity Authority, “BEAD Planning and Process,” Accessed November 5, 2025, <https://www.maineconnectivity.org/bead-process>.

⁵⁴ Maine Connectivity Authority, *Five-Year Broadband Access Plan*, August 18, 2023, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1r-mETSq_UdAuo5ZWKR1TBBiKb4g91LRs/view.

⁵⁵ State of Maine, L.D. 80, (2021), <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP0046&item=1&snum=130>.

⁵⁶ State of Maine, L.D. 1456, (2023), <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=SP0574&item=3&snum=131>.

⁵⁷ ME L.D. 1456, (2023).

⁵⁸ State of Maine, L.D. 1932, § 1500, (2024), https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?id=ID:bill:ME2023010H1240&ciq=urn:user:PA193501911&client_md=b9b31dccbe16fb496da36f42d4f85f72&mode=current_text.

⁵⁹ State of New Hampshire, Department of Business and Economic Affairs, “Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD),” accessed November 5, 2025, <https://www.nheconomy.com/office-of-broadband-initiatives/bead>.

increase the cost and difficulty of deploying broadband internet to underserved and unserved areas.⁶⁰

In 2025, New Hampshire ranked fifth in the best states for broadband coverage, with the fastest download speeds of any state.⁶¹ In 2024, when the BEAD proposal was submitted, the state had already achieved 97% broadband coverage,⁶² which increased to 98.6% in 2025.⁶³ The New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute credits early investment in the broadband network from COVID-19 relief efforts, the American Rescue Plan Act, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act for the state's initial success in expanding broadband internet access statewide.⁶⁴ The state's Department of Business and Economic Affairs contracted with two private telecommunications companies, awarding them a combined \$90 million for the expansion of broadband internet to underserved areas of the state.⁶⁵

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Disclaimer: The material contained in the report does not reflect the official policy of the University of Vermont.

⁶⁰ State of New Hampshire, Department of Business and Economic Affairs, *Five-year Broadband Action Plan*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.nheconomy.com/getmedia/e88b7ee7-4a7e-4f7e-9b7a-a6e5aac6c3e5/NH-BEAD-Five-Year-Broadband-Action-Plan.pdf>.

⁶¹ BroadbandNow, "Best and Worst States for Broadband, 2025," accessed November 5, 2025, <https://broadbandnow.com/research/best-states-with-internet-coverage-and-speed>.

⁶² State of New Hampshire, Department of Business and Economic Affairs, "New Hampshire Broadband Mapping Initiative Dashboard: 2024," accessed November 5, 2025, <https://broadbandnh.sr.unh.edu/portal/apps/dashboards/6583f0c466054041964d887af80abb84>.

⁶³ New Hampshire Department of Business and Economic Affairs, "New Hampshire Broadband Mapping Initiative Dashboard," accessed November 5, 2025, <https://broadbandnh.sr.unh.edu/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=31b1aeb597249239e588ae26caa759b>.

⁶⁴ State of New Hampshire, Fiscal Policy Institute, "New Hampshire Policy Points 2025: Broadband Internet," accessed November 5, 2025, <https://nhfpi.org/blog/new-hampshire-policy-points-2025-broadband-internet/>.

⁶⁵ State of New Hampshire, Department of Business and Economic Affairs, "New Hampshire's Massive Broadband Expansion More than Halfway Completed," accessed November 5, 2025, <https://www.nheconomy.com/news-press/new-hampshire%e2%80%99s-massive-broadband-expansion-more-t>.