

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 16, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independent Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write in support of your recent decision to encourage applicants to the Department's ReConnect Program to commit to following net neutrality principles by offering additional points to the applicant for making such a commitment. Amidst the ongoing pandemic that has dramatically increased millions of Americans' reliance on internet access, internet users need net neutrality now more than ever. We urge you to resist any efforts to undermine your wise and timely efforts to promote a free and open internet.

Net neutrality is a set of principles necessary to keep the internet open to all and free of discriminatory practices by powerful broadband providers. Net neutrality rules forbid internet service providers (ISPs) from blocking or slowing down customers' internet access; charging websites to reach users at quicker speeds; and instituting other unjust, unreasonable, and discriminatory practices. Net neutrality rules benefit consumers, promote free speech, and enrich the economy by making the internet a fair playing field where entrepreneurs and businesses of all sizes can thrive.

Your decision should also be understood in the context of the world in which we live today. In 2021, broadband has demonstrated that it is essential for nearly every facet of daily life. The rise of remote work has pushed more of the global economy online. Full participation in civic and democratic processes increasingly requires online engagement. These trends have made the need for strong net neutrality protections even more urgent, as reliance on the internet for education, health care, commerce, and community work has skyrocketed. The potential harms that internet users face without strong net neutrality protections are more sweeping than ever.

The Department of Agriculture plays an important role in closing the digital divide and bringing the internet to rural Americans. The ReConnect Program furnishes critical loans and grants to provide funds for the costs of construction, improvement, and acquisition of facilities and equipment needed to provide broadband service in rural areas. In evaluating applications for funding, the Department astutely decided that internet service providers that commit to following net neutrality would receive a leg up in their review. We wholeheartedly agree with your approach and hope other agencies will follow your excellent example.

Thank you again for your important work. Your efforts will greatly benefit internet users across our country.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Edward J. Markey in blue ink.

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Handwritten signature of Ron Wyden in blue ink.

Ron Wyden
United States Senator