

North Dakota

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N.D. broadband project focuses on high-speed service

By DAVE KOLPACK

ASSOCIATED PRESS

FARGO — Officials who are working to provide Internet service in rural areas of North Dakota say they are trying to fulfill the need for speed.

Jasper Schneider, state director for the Agriculture Department's rural development agency, which manages a broadband grant program, said the focus is changing from just getting rural residents connected to getting them high-speed fiber-optic service.

"We've moved past the point of just having connectivity. We're living in a data rich environment with streaming video and enriched websites," Schneider said Monday. "High speed internet is permanently changing the game for rural."

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state director, North Dakota Department of Agriculture rural development agency

The challenge, Schneider said, is the cost. The rural development office recently announced a \$6 million grant to BEK Communications Cooperative that will help provide fiber-to-the-home technology to a small, sparsely populated area of Barnes County, in southeastern North Dakota.

It takes a lot of work to reach limited customers in areas of low population density.

"It's expensive to put fiber in the ground and dig the trench from point A to point B, because you have

less of a user base," Schneider said. "Having this backbone is significant in making sure that we're not just having connectivity everywhere, but making sure it's a high-speed connection."

The USDA said it has invested more than \$344 million in North Dakota broadband and telecommunications projects since 2009.

David Crothers, executive vice president of the North Dakota Association of Telecommunications Cooperatives, said Monday that





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the 13 telephone cooperatives and five small commercial companies he represents are spending \$110 million a year upgrading broadband service.

Those companies should have 100 percent fiber-to-the-home service in place by 2017, which would cover more than 96 percent of the state's geographic territory, he said.

"We're going gangbusters," Crothers said. "We're going 100 miles per hour."

Schneider said that customers are no longer satisfied with dial-up service or even a slow DSL or wireless service. He said the goal is to get everyone's service to three megabits per second and above.

"We're going to fiber because there's nothing better than fiber," Crothers said. "It's got such huge capacity

and huge speed. We can send video over it, and that's what everybody wants right now.

"Of course," he added, "speed costs more."