

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-682](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2018, FCC estimated that 35 percent of Americans living on tribal lands lack broadband service compared to 8 percent of Americans overall. Various federal programs support increasing broadband deployment in unserved areas, including tribal lands. Tribes can form partnerships with private sector companies and others to deploy broadband infrastructure on tribal lands. GAO was asked to provide information on these partnerships.

This report discusses (1) examples and outcomes of tribal partnership arrangements, (2) the amount of federal funding provided to tribal entities for broadband deployment, and (3) stakeholder-identified barriers that tribes face in obtaining federal funding and the extent to which federal agencies have addressed those barriers. GAO identified partnerships by reviewing federally funded broadband projects that included a partnership component; analyzed federal funding dedicated to broadband deployment; interviewed agency and tribal government officials, tribal associations, tribally owned broadband providers, and industry stakeholders; and assessed RUS's efforts to address the regulatory funding barriers tribes may face. The information presented is illustrative and is not generalizable to all tribes or all partnerships.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that RUS identify and address regulatory barriers that impede tribal entities from obtaining RUS funding for broadband deployment. RUS neither agreed nor disagreed with this recommendation.

View [GAO-18-682](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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TRIBAL BROADBAND

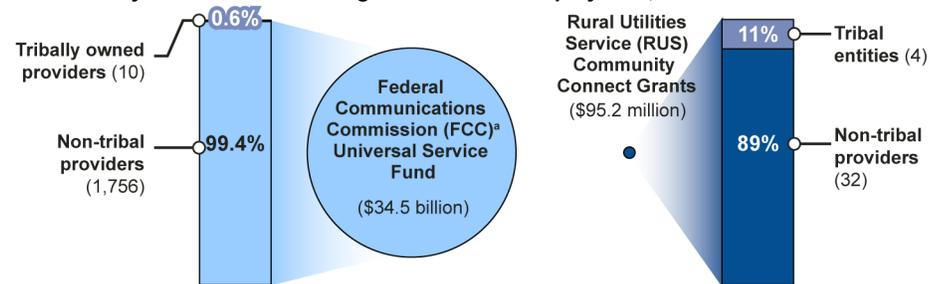
Few Partnerships Exist and the Rural Utilities Service Needs to Identify and Address Any Funding Barriers Tribes Face

What GAO Found

GAO identified some partnership arrangements between tribes and other entities to increase broadband access on tribal lands. Among the seven examples GAO identified, tribes partnered with different types of entities including private broadband providers, a community access network provider, an electric cooperative, a regional consortium, and tribally owned broadband providers. According to the tribes participating in the partnerships, almost all of the partnerships improved broadband service on tribal lands.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) are the primary sources of federal funding to deploy broadband infrastructure where the cost of providing service is high, including on tribal lands. GAO reviewed funding for four programs, three in FCC and one grant program in RUS, and found that in total, less than 1 percent has gone directly to tribes or to tribally owned broadband providers to expand broadband service. GAO found that 14 tribal entities received federal funding from FCC and RUS to increase broadband deployment for 2010–2017.

GAO's Analysis of Federal Funding for Broadband Deployment, 2010-2017



Sources: GAO analysis of FCC and RUS data. | GAO-18-682

^aFCC funding includes the Mobility Fund Phase I, Tribal Mobility Fund Phase I, and Connect America Fund.

The tribal officials, tribal associations, and tribally owned broadband providers GAO contacted cited several barriers tribes face in obtaining federal funding to deploy broadband service on tribal lands. For example, they said tribes face regulatory barriers in applying for RUS's grant funding, including (1) preparing existing and proposed network design, (2) demonstrating financial sustainability of the broadband project within 5 years, and (3) obtaining matching funds. An interagency council recently recommended that federal agencies identify and address regulatory barriers that may unduly impede broadband deployment. Although RUS conducts some outreach with tribes, it has not undertaken a formal assessment to identify and address the regulatory barriers that tribes may face in obtaining RUS's funding for broadband deployment. RUS officials told GAO that they do not have the resources to do so. Nevertheless, lacking such an assessment, tribes may continue to face regulatory barriers in obtaining RUS funding for broadband deployment on their lands. By identifying and addressing any regulatory barriers that impede tribal entities' access to RUS funding, RUS could help tribes obtain funding to expand broadband deployment on tribal lands.