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**Utilities Technology Council
Statement for the Record
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation
Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation, and the Internet
Hearing on The Impact of Broadband Investments in Rural America**

The Utilities Technology Council (UTC) thanks the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation, and the Internet for the opportunity to submit these comments for the record regarding the above-referenced hearing. As the Subcommittee considers the impact broadband investments can have in rural America, we urge members to consider the contributions of the electric utility companies that are providing broadband service to their customers in locations unserved and underserved by traditional telecommunications carriers. These utilities are providing broadband in their communities not only to provide this needed service but also to improve and empower their communities.

Established in 1948, UTC is the global association representing energy and water utilities on their needs related to the deployment of reliable and resilient information and communications technology (ICT). Energy and water utilities use ICT networks as the backbone for the infrastructure that delivers safe, reliable, and secure energy and water services. These networks are essential for reliability, safety, resiliency, and security.

UTC applauds the Committee for holding this important hearing. We share the Subcommittee's desire to see competitive, affordable broadband services deployed to all Americans. It is no secret that there are far too many areas of the U.S. with no broadband service at all. Because broadband can literally be the dividing line between communities that survive and those that fail, we have seen states such as Mississippi and Arkansas recently pass new laws allowing more entities—including cooperative and municipally-owned utilities—to provide broadband services.

Electric utilities of all sizes and ownership types, from large investor-owned utilities serving millions to publicly and consumer-owned utilities located in smaller towns and rural areas, are critical partners in bringing broadband to rural America. Although UTC's membership is diverse, our core utility members share the belief that access to affordable and reliable broadband is a key economic driver for our nation. In fact, electric utilities enable broadband access in multiple ways, most notably by providing access to their infrastructure to telecommunications providers. Additionally, where not prohibited by state or local statute, a number of utilities are providing broadband services themselves in areas where private firms have decided not to deploy. Most of these locations are in rural areas.

For electric utilities, the decision to provide broadband is a natural progression because in most cases these utilities have already built communications networks to enhance electric reliability and resiliency; these networks include wireline and wireless services that have narrowband and broadband features. Electric utilities can therefore use both their existing knowledge and, in some cases, their infrastructure to deliver broadband. Importantly, utility broadband services are reasonably comparable to the cost and quality of broadband available in urban areas.

Utilities can be critical partners to broadband deployment in other ways as well. For example, Jackson, Mississippi-based Entergy Mississippi, an affiliate of New Orleans-based Entergy, teamed up with technology firm C Spire in an innovative partnership to bring high-speed broadband services in rural Mississippi. Under the arrangement, approved last year by the Mississippi Public Service Commission, C Spire will install fiber-optic and other broadband communications infrastructure along portions of Entergy Mississippi's service territory. Entergy Mississippi will lease the broadband networks for their own advanced electric meters and C Spire will have access to the utility's customers along those routes. This unique partnership is bringing broadband services to areas of Mississippi that have no broadband service.

Most obviously, utilities empower broadband by providing telecommunications and cable suppliers affordable access to utility poles. Utility poles are essential to delivering reliable and affordable electricity to everyone in the country. Many, if not all, of these poles carry cable, broadband, and other services. As this Committee knows, the regulation of pole-attachment policies is carried out by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for poles owned by investor-owned (private, for-profit) utilities. The FCC has issued pole-attachment policies over the last year that the agency claims will increase broadband access. The agency in fact took matters one step further last fall by issuing new rules preempting state and local authorities over the siting of small-cellular devices under the guise of 5G.

Clearly these policies are not a panacea. Despite pronouncements that reducing regulatory requirements and fees will spur rural broadband development, the reality has proven otherwise. Evidence suggests that lower pole-attachment rates have no bearing on the deployment of rural broadband. Indeed, state governmental agencies have found no conclusive evidence linking lower pole fees to rural broadband expansion. The Virginia State Corporation Commission concluded, in a 2011 report, that, "No persuasive evidence was submitted in this proceeding that proved lower pole-attachment rates would directly result in additional broadband deployment."¹ Additionally, the communications industry has advocated that the only way to bridge the rural Digital Divide is through federal subsidies.

As it looks to encourage broadband deployment, UTC recommends this Subcommittee consider the following:

- Support broadband-funding programs that promote the deployment of future-proof networks which provide robust, reliable and affordable broadband services to all Americans; and
- Support pole-attachment policies that promote safety, reliability and security of electric utility infrastructure while accelerating broadband deployment.

UTC thanks the Committee for holding this important hearing and appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement. Ensuring that all Americans have access to affordable, reliable broadband is just as important today as electricity was for the growth of the nation a century ago. Now as then, electric utilities are critical partners in doing so and stand ready to assist. We look forward to working with the Committee in ensuring that all Americans have access to robust, affordable and reliable broadband networks and services.

¹ "Report on Electric Cooperative Pole Attachment Issues." Commonwealth of Virginia State Corporation Commission, November 1, 2011. Link to text: <http://www.scc.virginia.gov/docketsearch/DOCS/2h%40m011.PDF>