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Lawmakers Bemoan New Drop In High-Speed Ranking

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Lawmakers in both chambers raised concerns Tuesday that the United States has dropped three spots in a closely watched international ranking of high-speed Internet service.

According to fresh data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the nation has slipped from 12th to 15th in per-capita broadband penetration among 30 OECD nations. In 2001, America ranked fourth.

"While some will debate what, in fact, these rankings measure, one thing that cannot be debated is the fact we continue to fall further down the list," Senate Commerce Committee Chairman **Daniel Inouye**, D-Hawaii, said at a hearing before his panel. "Too many of our broadband counterparts are passing us by, and for this we are paying a price."

He said it is imperative that the nation get its "broadband house in order and our communications policy right."

"It appears as if America's broadband penetration is stalling at dial-up speed while other nations have developed national plans and are moving ahead," said Massachusetts Democrat **Edward Markey**, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Telecommunications and the Internet Subcommittee, at a concurrent hearing.

Inouye announced Tuesday that he will introduce two new bills designed to tackle aspects of the problem. One measure seeks to improve the government's collection of subscriber data by remedying what many consider to be a flaw: counting an entire ZIP code as served by a high-speed Internet provider if one citizen there receives broadband.

Inouye also plans legislation to fund research on information and communications technology, though further details were not immediately available.

"I think we need a bold vision for a national broadband policy," **Ben Scott**, policy director at the watchdog group Free Press, told the Senate panel. He underscored the importance of fostering competition not just between competing

cable- and telephone-delivered broadband companies but within those technologies.

Some witnesses voiced a positive outlook. **Jeffrey Eisenach**, an adjunct law professor at George Mason University and chairman of Criterion Economics, a consulting firm whose clients include phone and cable firms, said the OECD ranking does not reflect the facts that broadband is being rapidly deployed in the United States and that competition is growing.

Echoing those views was **Scott Wallsten**, a senior fellow and director of communications policy studies at the Progress and Freedom Foundation, whose donors include broadband companies. He argued that the market is working well and cautioned against sweeping regulation that would saddle providers with regulatory barriers.

A possible model for the nation is Kentucky, which has gained considerable attention in Washington for its aggressive broadband rollout.

Brian Mefford, president and CEO of the nonprofit Connected Nation, which is spearheading the Connect Kentucky project, testified that the state has increased broadband access from 60 percent to 92 percent since 2004 and is on track for 100 percent coverage this year.

Across the Capitol, the House telecom subcommittee listened to representatives from Great Britain, Japan and New Zealand about their countries' broadband policies. "Whatever number one goes by, we're a long way from first and we're not doing the things we need to do to get there," said **Anna Eshoo**, D-Calif.

But Reps. **Joe Barton** of Texas and Fred Upton of Michigan, the ranking Republicans on the full committee and subcommittee respectively, said the country is not as bad off regarding broadband competition as the OECD rankings indicate. Barton explained that the data counts residential broadband, not business broadband.

Markey countered that the U.S. broadband market is essentially a duopoly at best, "marked by low speeds and high prices." He noted that "Japan and the U.K. have faster broadband, cheaper broadband and more broadband choices."

Rep. **Mike Doyle**, D-Pa., broke into song briefly with his rendition of the All in the Family theme "Those Were The Days" to make the point that other countries have surpassed America in broadband rollout by adopting U.S. policies that were later abandoned.

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