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## **United States' Fall in Global Broadband Ranking a Matter of Debate**

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By Stokely Baksh

WASHINGTON, April 24, 2007 – Although the United States has slipped from 12th to 15th position in a global ranking of national broadband penetration, panelists appearing before a Senate Commerce Committee on broadband competitiveness on Tuesday differed on whether the U.S. was truly falling behind other nations.

Although all agreed on the need for better data collection of broadband statistics from the Federal Communications Commission, they disagreed on the form of collection. The hearing took place after the recent release of international broadband statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development showing the 15th place U.S. position.

"Recent broadband policy at the FCC has not embraced a free market approach to enabling competition, but rather supported the entrenched incumbency of a rigid duopoly," said Ben Scott, policy director of Free Press, a non-profit organization advocating for policies affecting media ownership and telecommunications issues.

The FCC's use of ZIP code-based system to measure the national availability of broadband availability was discredited, Scott said. A Government Accountability Office report "criticized [the FCC for] vastly overstating the level of availability and competition within the broadband market" – and missed micro gaps in service availability, he said.

"We now fall far behind others in penetration of high-speed broadband, and we have not commercially brought next generation services to the consumer," said Adam Drobat, chief technology officer and president of advanced technology solutions for Telcordia Technologies, speaking on behalf of the Telecommunications Industry Association (TIA).

Jeffrey Eisenach, chairman of Criterion Economics, said that the country shouldn't panic over the OCED standings. But he emphasized the need for better broadband information and deployment in rural areas. Eisenach also suggested that geographical maps should be used to demonstrate broadband coverage areas and who is providing it.

Scott Wallsten, senior fellow and director of communications policy studies at the Progress and Freedom Foundation, said that United States companies are making a number of investments in broadband that contradict any obvious market failure. These includes the increase of the number of broadband connections by 26 percent in the first six months of 2006 (more than 60 million high-speed connections) and deployment of fiber-optic broadband network by [Verizon Communications](#) and [AT&T](#). He also urged an overhaul of FCC data collection practices.

Other panelists highlighted the difficulties of using funds from the Agriculture Department's Rural Utilities Service for broadband development. A leader in improving Kentucky's broadband deployment, Brian Mefford, President and CEO of Connect Kentucky and Connection Nation, said that RUS funds weren't adequate to help the state improve its broadband penetration.

Mefford helped launched Kentucky's 2004 Prescription for Innovation plan to accelerate the deployment of technology in the state and to serve as a blueprint for other states, or for the nation, in accelerating broadband penetration.

The plan increased broadband availability from 60 percent to 92 percent, Mefford said. Home use was up 73 percent. Also, the project collected more than \$650 million in private capital investments for the state, and increased Kentucky information jobs by 3.1 percent, Mefford said in his testimony. He said that the improvements have put the state on track to be the first state with 100 percent broadband coverage.

Jack Wolf, [Qualcomm's](#) vice president of technology, called for more funding from the government and the industry in research and development. Specifically, he reiterated the National Research Council's call for Advanced Telecommunications Research Activity (ATRA) to stimulate and coordinate research across industry, academia, and government. ATRA is a recommendation of the Committee on Telecommunications Research and Development of the National Research Council, of which Wolf is a member.

The panelists also spoke about the need to allow new wireless broadband in vacant television channels, as well as the FCC's auction of radio frequencies in the 700 Megahertz (MHz) band, as steps in the direction of universally available and affordable broadband.

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