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State broadband improvement funding at risk without AB 1758

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Broadband infrastructure improvement projects are at risk of being cut if a state assemblyman's legislation doesn't move forward.

Assembly Bill 1758, named the "Internet for All Now Act" by Assemblyman Mark Stone, D-Monterey Bay, would amend legislation governing the California Advanced Services Fund for telecommunications.

The CASF acts as a statewide grant program splitting funds between three accounts: The Broadband Infrastructure Grant/Revolving Loan Account, Rural and Regional Urban Consortia Account, and the Broadband Public Housing Account.

Prior legislation's goal was a 98 percent broadband access rate for underserved or unserved households in the state by the end of 2015, a goal which hasn't been met.

In part, this was to be achieved with funding from the CASF's broadband infrastructure account to improve telecommunication.

The problem is the account has been unable to meet demand due to a shortage of funds.

Trish Steel, chairwoman of the Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County, said the state's goal of 98 percent for broadband access is only at 95.5 percent to date, and 79 percent for actual household adoption.

"The broadband infrastructure grant program is out of money, and actually has 18 projects already submitted which it can't fund because it is out of money," Steel said by email Tuesday.

Stone's bill would extend the time frame for achieving the 98 percent goal to 2023, along with a statewide goal of 90 percent for actual household adoption rate. Additionally, \$350 million would be used to fund the broadband infrastructure grant account over time through collected surcharges.

The road ahead for AB 1758 appears to be murky, according to Steel, who said the bill is opposed by larger broadband companies that don't use the funds, and say it is unnecessary. Steel and other broadband advocates disagree, however, as rural areas continue to fall short in receiving adequate service.

Steel said the program remains necessary as it helps to move projects forward in rural counties, like Mendocino County, which are high-cost areas for broadband projects.

Citing data from the state Public Utilities Commission, Steel said that out of eight rural Northern California counties, nearly 47,000 households, or 11 percent, remain unserved or underserved.

The number is particularly high for Mendocino County, at 34 percent. It's 5 percent when considering the state as a whole.

In the past, according to Steel, smaller Internet service providers have used the funds to improve broadband infrastructure in Comptche, Laytonville, Covelo and Boonville.

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Steel asked that people in support of furthering broadband improvements send letters to the Assembly's Committee on Utilities and Commerce, and to North Coast Assemblyman Jim Wood and Sen. Mike McGuire to urge them to co-sponsor Stone's legislation as soon as possible.

Further discussion of AB 1758 is expected to take place before the Assembly's Committee on Utilities and Commerce on March 28.