

Rural Connectivity Year in Review



Since APAS released its report on rural connectivity in March 2021, producers and rural residents have continued to report internet related service disruptions and delays in their business transactions and daily lives. APAS has also continued to advocate for the Report's 43 recommendations to improve services for rural areas. While we have started to see progress on many issues raised in the Report, the continued digitization of the lives and businesses of people in rural Saskatchewan has continued to highlight the need for rapid action.

Results from the APAS Internet Speed Test

APAS has continued a partnership with the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) to provide Saskatchewan's only real-world speed test. The speed test has collected over 30,000 speeds test from across Saskatchewan. The results reflect the poor state of service in rural Saskatchewan and how much more work needs to be done. Of the 16,692 tests taken in Saskatchewan's rural municipalities, only 2.3% met the 50/10 CRTC required service, and 87.1% had less than 5/1 service.

APAS continues to urge rural residents to take the speed test at <https://performance.cira.ca/apas>.

SaskTel

APAS has been pleased with recent investments and efforts on the part of Sasktel to upgrade and expand their networks across rural Saskatchewan. Programs like the Rural Fibre Initiative, and the recent investment to upgrade wireless networks are the type of investment needed to lay the foundation for bridging the digital divide. SaskTel has also announced they are working with five smaller service providers to improve access to networks through the Rural Broadband Initiative, which was a key recommendation included in the APAS Connectivity Report. We look forward to seeing the success of these programs.

While these are positive developments, the APAS Connectivity Report outlined additional policy options the Government of Saskatchewan could use to immediately improve services in rural Saskatchewan. These include:

- Reduce the dividend that SaskTel is paying to the province and use that money for service deployment in rural Saskatchewan
- Allow service providers access to SaskPowers dark fibre network.
- Ensuring fair access for smaller service providers to the Crown's existing infrastructure (towers, poles, conduit).

Universal Broadband Fund

Over the last year, APAS has been monitoring the roll-out of the Universal Broadband Fund (UBF), a historic nation building infrastructure program that is expected to invest \$2.75 billion dollars in connectivity projects across Canada. Of the over \$2 billion allocated so far Saskatchewan has received only \$6.6 million with SaskTel having yet to receive any money for projects.

APAS has been informed that many companies have applications to the UBF to build out the needed networks. The provinces having the greatest success in getting shovels and fibre into the ground are those that have signed bilateral agreements with the federal government. Alberta, Quebec, and British Columbia have 50:50 cost share agreements in place that are beginning to roll out hundreds of millions of dollars in funding. These are significant investments that will improve services in these provinces and APAS is urging both levels of government to prioritize Saskatchewan applications and to begin talks to maximize investment into this province.

Additional Work

APAS signed a letter of support for Dan Mazier's private members Bill C-299 in the last Parliament. This private member's bill would have required more transparency from telecommunication companies regarding advertised speeds. The letter of support included data from APAS Speed-test showing how Saskatchewan rural residents are paying for services they are not receiving.

Submissions on Connectivity

APAS has been able to use the findings of our report and the speed test to make multiple submissions this year.

Project funding approval for BH Telecom Corp.'s Saskatchewan transport fibre project, APAS wrote to the CRTC to intervene. Our intervention highlighted the need for the funding of projects in rural Saskatchewan, and that rural communities are entitled to funding because they have not yet reached minimum service standards set out by the CRTC.

Consultation on New Access Licensing Framework, Changes to Subordinate Licensing and White Space to Support Rural and Remote Deployment - APAS partnered with the Canadian Federation of Agriculture on a submission that discussed the importance of high standards of deployment in rural Saskatchewan with the recommendation that service providers lose access to their spectrum when they fail to deploy.

Consultation on a Policy and Licensing Framework for Spectrum in the 3800 MHz Band, APAS wrote to ISED Canada urging for the enforcement of 'use it or lose it' policies, smaller tier sizes, and higher deployment conditions.

Consultation on Order Directing to the CRTC on Renewed Approach on Telecommunications, APAS wrote to the federal government asking for a renewed CRTC focus on rural connectivity, enhanced consumer protection, the better interconnection between companies, and re-establishing an operational fund for rural and remote areas.

Consultation on Policy and Licensing Framework for Spectrum in the 26, 28, and 38 GHz Bands, APAS wrote to ISED Canada asking that the licensing for this upcoming spectrum auction having higher deployment conditions, use it or lose it provisions, reduced tier sizes, and that the proceeds of these licenses be used to further connectivity.

Consultation on Spectrum Outlook 2022 to 2026, APAS plans to make a submission to ISED on this in early November, items included will be higher deployment conditions, reduced tier sizes, re-establishing an operational fund, and refarming spectrum for rural areas.

Sharing Our Findings

APAS had the opportunity over the last year to share our report and findings to councilors, business leaders, politicians, and organizations across Saskatchewan and in Ottawa. If you are interested in learning more, you can contact Brent Kobes (bkobes@apas.ca) to set up your own meeting.

Additionally, APAS partnered with Access Communications to make a 50-minute television broadcast on rural connectivity available on our YouTube channel, covering the report and recommendations.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nExAq17IHlw>

Read the full report at <https://apas.foleon.com/rural-connectivity-task-force/rural-connectivity-task-force/rural-connectivity-task-force/>.