

From our CEOs: To Serve and Connect

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Upcountry is here to stay

We had a very busy summer and are quickly looking ahead to fall as we continue our quest to connect unserved and underserved parts of the Upstate with high-speed fiber broadband. A partnership of Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER, Upcountry Fiber has the backing of local employees, a long-standing history in the area and a shared commitment to bring high quality and excellent service to the area.

Earlier this summer, we attended the Smart Rural Communities Conference, hosted by NTCA—the Rural Broadband Association. NTCA is our national voice, representing nearly 850 independent, family-owned and community-based telecommunications companies. They are committed to advancing policies to help close the digital divide.

There was significant discussion about broadband funding, and our team has been busy advocating at the state level. We're gaining traction, and most importantly, we're pleased to be part of a joint effort to connect rural America. The most potential for progress exists in federal, state and private entities working together for the collective good.

In March 2021, the federal government passed the American Rescue Plan Act that created additional funding for state and local governments to help with COVID relief. The bill also contained incentives to increase broadband infrastructure, bring high-speed broadband infrastructure into rural areas and address the digital divide.

Additionally, this past spring, the South Carolina Legislature passed H. 4408, a bill that appropriated \$400 million to the Office of Regulatory Staff to create a competitive grant application process to aid in broadband deployment across the state in rural areas. The agency has been working to finalize the competitive grant application process, and it hopes to start awarding grants later this fall.

While these grants will help make service to you more economically feasible, it's important to know that our commitment to connecting the Upstate is unwavering. When complete, this project will encompass 6,000 miles of fiber and cover 1,800 square miles through remote, hilly and woody terrain.

While this is a five- to seven-year project, it's important to note that on average, each month, we typically build out 100 miles of fiber. So far this year, we have built 650 miles with another 200 miles coming into service soon. To put the numbers in perspective, we've built out more fiber this year than we did in the past five years. The pace is fast. The stakes are high. We know many of you have waited for a long time. We see you, and we're working hard for you.

Each week, our engineering, construction and management teams meet to discuss progress. The differences from week to week are staggering. These teams are working at a rapid pace, and they are driven by a mission that runs much deeper than the work itself: to serve. It's life-changing work, after all. We don't take it lightly, nor do we take your needs lightly.

We're committed to you. To serve. To connect. To make your lives and your communities simply better.