ReConnect Program: Frequently Asked Questions

General Application Inquiries

Updated March 2, 2021

Question: What is the ReConnect Program?

Answer: The ReConnect Program is a broadband pilot program that offers federal loans, grants, and combinations thereof to facilitate broadband deployment in rural areas. ReConnect loans and grants provide funds for the costs of construction, improvement, or acquisition of facilities and equipment needed to provide broadband service to rural areas without sufficient broadband access, defined as 10 Mbps downstream and 1 Mbps upstream.

Question: What types of assistance are available in the ReConnect program?

Answer: USDA will offer loans and grants to build infrastructure and install equipment that provides modern, reliable, high-speed Internet service in rural America. The ReConnect program offers three products: 100% Loans, 50% Loan-50% Grant combinations, and 100% Grants. More information about the three products can be found on the ReConnect website at reconnect.usda.gov.

Question: Is the Funding Opportunity Announcement published in 2019 different from the one published in 2018?

Answer: Yes, there were a number of changes in the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) published on December 12, 2019. Here is a high-level summary of the changes, however, RUS encourages you to review the FOA closely as you prepare to apply. Those changes include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The application window for the three categories of funding will be from January 31, 2020 through midnight, based on the time zone the applicant is located in, on April 15, 2020.

- Definitions have been added for healthcare and educational facilities and the name for critical community facilities has been changed to essential community facilities.

- For 100 percent grants, 90 percent of the proposed funded service area cannot have sufficient access to broadband, as opposed to 100 percent under round one.

- The requirement for two years of unqualified, comparative, audited financial statements has been changed to unqualified, comparative, audited financial statements for the previous year from the date the application has been submitted.

- The requirement that applicants must submit certifications from the appropriate state or tribal broadband office has been changed to a voluntary request.

- Pre-application expenses that were incurred for round one, but benefit an application for round two, may be funded up to the 5 percent of the total award in round 2.

- Under certain conditions a subsidiary can use the unqualified, comparative, audited statements to meet certain eligibility requirements.

- The scoring criteria for farms has been changed. Applicants will receive 1 point for every 10 farms served up to a maximum of 20 points. Farms will be counted using 2017 Census of Agriculture data.

- Tribal leaders can submit documentation supporting scoring points for the number of healthcare, educational and essential community facilities.

- The time period incumbent service providers will be able to challenge if sufficient service is present in an applicant's proposed funded service area is being increased from 30 days to 45 days.

Question: **When will the online application system be live?**

Answer: The RUS Online Application System opened on January 31, 2020 and closes on April 15, 2020. Applicants will be able to access the application system at https://reconnect.usda.gov.

Question: What types of IDs do we need to access the ReConnect Application System and to file an application?

Answer: To access the application system, Applicants will need a USDA verified (Level II) eAuthentication (eAuth) account, which can be obtained at www.eauth.usda.gov. All Online Application System users are required to have a verified eAuth.

Additionally, to file an application Applicants will need an Employer Identification Number (EIN), obtainable at tax-irs-ein.com; a Dun & Bradstreet Number (DUNS Number), obtainable at fedgov.dnb.com/webform; a current active registration in the System for Award Management (SAM),

obtainable at sam.gov/sam; and, a Commercial and Government Entity (CAGE) Code, obtainable in SAM.

Question: How does an applicant receive a verified (Level II) eAuthentication (eAuth) account?

Answer: Follow the instructions on the USDA eAuth website: https://www.eauth.usda.gov/home to create a verified (Level II) eAuthentication (eAuth) account or upgrade an existing account to "verified." A Level II eAuth account qualifies as a verified account and can be used to access the Online Application System. Every person at the applicant's organization who needs access to the Online Application System must have a verified (Level II) eAuth account.

Question: Can applicants begin working on the application before the ARR is approved?

Answer: No, applicants cannot begin working on an application until the ARR is approved. ARR approval takes approximately two business days.

Question: Can an applicant start an application if they do not have their SAM registration or DUNS number yet?

Answer: It can take up to three weeks to register in SAM, get a CAGE Code (at SAM.gov) and get a DUNS number so it is important to get these initial items started as soon as possible. While an applicant can start an application without a DUNS number, an applicant will not be able to submit the application without both the CAGE Code and the DUNS Number.

Question: Will consultants, including consulting engineers, have access to the online application site for clients?

Answer: Yes, consultants may be granted access to the Online Application System by an applicant. Once assigned the role of "Consultant" within the system, an individual consultant can access multiple applications within the system. Please note, all individuals who log into the system must have a USDA verified (Level II) eAuth account. Additionally, Consultants must NOT enter the portal until they receive an email indicating that the applicant has assigned them a consultant role in the system. Otherwise, these individuals risk being locked out of the portal. If locked out of the portal, submit a Help Desk ticket through the ReConnect website at www.usda.gov/reconnect/contact-us.

Question: How do I start my application for ReConnect funds?

Answer: Begin by reviewing the 2019 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), published on December 12, 2019 for current program and eligibility requirements. The FOA and other resources, including program information, fact sheets, and technical assistance materials are available on the ReConnect website at reconnect.usda.gov. All applications must be submitted through the RUS Online Application System, which opened on January 31, 2020 and will close at midnight, based on the time zone the applicant is located in, on April 15, 2020.

After the application window has opened, applicants can create an account in the application system by submitting an Authorized Representative Request (ARR). Applicants cannot begin working on an application in the system until the ARR is approved. Keep in mind, ARR approval takes approximately two business days.

Question: My organization uses Internet Explorer and I am having problems accessing the application system. What can I do to improve my access to the system?

Answer: Internet Explorer and Safari are not recommended browsers for using the Application System. Applicants should use Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox, or Microsoft Edge to successfully complete the application.

Question: My application timed out and I lost the information entered into the system. Can USDA recover this information?

Answer: USDA recommends saving applications at every opportunity. Some sections have a save button on every page, but other sections can only be saved once the applicant completes the section. The system will time out after 15 minutes, and the applicant will receive a warning message at approximately 14 minutes and 30 seconds. If an application times out without being saved, the applicant will lose all information entered since the last save. USDA cannot recover any information lost from not saving the application.

Question: When will USDA announce awards for the new round of funding?

Answer: Information about award announcements is not available at this time. More information about the award announcement schedule will be available after the application window is closed and all applications have been received. The deadline for all applications (100% loan, 50/50 loan-grant combination and 100% grant) is midnight, based on the time zone the applicant is located in, April 15, 2020. 100% loan applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis. 50/50 loan-grant combinations will be

reviewed and evaluated competitively against other 50/50 applications. 100% grant applications will be reviewed and evaluated competitively against other 100% grant applications.

Question: What is considered an affiliate company? What is the ownership threshold for considering a company an affiliate?

Answer: The ReConnect legal documents provide the definition of an affiliate. Applicants should use the definition to determine affiliate relationships. The definition is as follows: "Affiliate" or "Affiliated Company" of any specified person or entity means any other person or entity directly or indirectly controlling of, controlled by, under direct or indirect common control with, or related to, such specified person or entity, or which exists for the sole purpose of providing any service to one company or exclusively to companies which otherwise meet the definition of affiliate. This definition includes Variable Interest Entities as described in Financial Accounting Standards Board Interpretation (FIN) No. 46(R), Consolidation of Variable Interest Entities. For the purpose of this definition, "control" means the possession directly or indirectly, of the power to direct or cause the direction of the management and policies of a company, whether such power is exercised through one or more intermediary companies, or alone, or in conjunction with, or pursuant to an agreement with one or more other companies, and whether such power is established through a majority or minority ownership voting of securities, common directors, officers, or stockholders, voting trust, holding trusts (other than money exchanged) for property or services.

Question: How will USDA know where there are broadband services at 10/1 Mbps speeds currently provided?

Answer: USDA will use several methods to verify whether a particular Proposed Funded Service Area (PFSA) currently has 10/1 broadband service available. The Agency will post a Public Notice Filing (PNF) of the proposed service area on the ReConnect webpage at https://reconnect.usda.gov and service providers in those areas can submit a Public Notice Response indicating if they are already providing 10/1 Mbps. Then, USDA will conduct Service Area Validations (SAVs) for all PFSAs in an application to verify the availability of 10/1 service and other aspects of the application. Service area validations include some desktop research using data currently available. Additionally, USDA will send subject matter experts (SMEs) to service area locations to conduct field tests to determine if the areas meet the eligibility requirements.

Question: Does RUS require financial statements as part of the application?

Answer: Yes, there are three options for an applicant regarding financial statements:

1. An applicant must submit audited financial statements for the previous year from the date the application has been submitted. For the FY2020 round, the applicant would be required to submit its 2019 audit.

2. If an applicant does not have completed audited financial statements from the previous year, then the applicant can submit the two previous unqualified audits that have been completed. For the FY2020 round, the applicant would be required to submit its 2018 audit and 2017 audit.

3. If an applicant does not have the previous two years available and an application is submitted before the end of April 2020, then the applicant can submit the most recent yearend audit as well as an engagement letter with the CPA to demonstrate that the 2019 audit has been started. For the FY2020 round, the applicant would submit the 2018 audit and letter of engagement for 2019.

Please note, an applicant can use the consolidated financials of the parent as long as the parent fully guarantees the loan, or in the case of a grant, guarantees that construction will be completed as approved in the application or will repay the grant to RUS.

Question: Can an applicant use Fiscal Year projections when completing the financials component of the application or must they use Calendar Year projections?

Answer: An applicant can submit their financial information using a calendar year or fiscal year basis for historical and forecasting, but the methodology must be consistent across all years.

Question: Does the April 15th application deadline extension affect the required financial statements?

Answer: Yes, originally RUS only allowed applicants to submit its two previous audits for 2017 and 2018 to satisfy the audit requirement if an application is submitted in the first quarter of the calendar year and the most recent yearend audit has not been completed. However, this has been extended to include any application submitted before April 30, 2020.

Question: Would two entities owned by the same holding company be able to submit separate applications as separate entities proposing to serve different areas? Or is only one application allowed because both entities are owned by the same holding company?

Answer: As long as each entity is organized as a standalone company, then each entity can submit separate applications. However, each company must independently have the unqualified, comparative

audited financial statement for the previous calendar year from the date the application is submitted and meet all other eligibility requirements.

Question: Can a subsidiary use a parent company's financials?

Answer: A subsidiary may use consolidated financials of the parent company if the parent fully guarantees the loan, or in the case of a grant, guarantees construction will be completed. The consolidated schedules (Balance Sheets, Income Statements, and Statement of Cash Flow) must contain enough detail, including notes to the financial statements regarding subsidiary activities, to enable USDA to determine the creditworthiness of the subsidiary.

Question: What needs to be included for the real property question (i.e., Does the applicant own any real property? If so, upload all applicable copies of real estate deeds or any real property schedules). Do applicants need to upload documents for each property that they own, or can they use a real property schedule that lists all of their real property?

Answer: The question regarding real property is intended to determine whether or not a mortgage would be required if the project is awarded. To satisfy this requirement, applicants should upload a copy of the company's real estate deeds and Real Property Schedule. If, however, the real estate deeds are voluminous in size, a Real Property Schedule that lists all of the applicant's real property is satisfactory at the time of application submission. Please note, applicants for the 100% grant product should select "no" in response to this question.

Question: Are all CAF II – Auction 903 Winners' Census Block Group(s) off-limits to other applicants, regardless of the level and type of service that the CAF II Winner proposed to offer in those areas?

Answer: Yes, for areas within the boundaries of a CAF II Census Block Group, only the CAF II Winner is eligible to apply but the CAF II Winner may only request a 100% loan. The exception to this requirement is if the CAF II Auction 903 area overlaps with a Protected Broadband Borrower's service area. In this case, the Protected Broadband Borrower is the only entity allowed to apply in that area. The CAF II Auction 903 and Protected Broadband Borrower service areas can be found on the RUS Mapping Tool at https://reconnect.usda.gov.

Question: Will ReConnect fund middle-mile only projects?

Answer: Stand-alone middle-mile projects are not eligible under the ReConnect Program. However, middle-mile facilities are eligible if they are needed to bring sufficient broadband service to all premises in the PFSA.

Question: Can an applicant apply for Community Connect and ReConnect funds for different areas?

Answer: Yes, an applicant may apply for funds from both programs if the project serves different broadband service areas. The PFSAs included in the application for the ReConnect Program must meet eligibility requirements on a standalone basis.

Question: Please explain the 10/1 Mbps versus 25/3 Mbps service requirements.

Answer: To be eligible for ReConnect funding, 90% of the households within a PFSA must lack sufficient access to broadband service. "Sufficient access" is defined as fixed, terrestrial broadband service delivering at least 10 Mbps downstream and 1 Mbps upstream. If a proposed service area has 10/1 Mbps or greater service available, the area is not eligible for ReConnect funding. Availability of 25/3 Mbps service to all premises in a PFSA is the construction requirement for a ReConnect project. The project must be capable of providing fixed, terrestrial broadband service at a speed of 25/3 Mbps to every premise within the PFSA.

Question: Can one applicant request funding from all three funding categories?

Answer: One applicant may not request funding from all three funding categories. An applicant must choose one type of funding (100% loan, 50/50 loan-grant combination and 100% grant)to apply for and may only submit one application.

Question: If an applicant applies for but does not receive a 100% grant, may they then be considered for the 50/50 combination loan-grant category?

Answer: No, an applicant is only able to submit one application.

Question: Does USDA have sample language for the Authorized Representative Request (ARR)? To whom and to where should the ARR and Board resolution be submitted?

Answer: The ARR instructions and sample board resolution language are available on the ReConnect website at https://reconnect.usda.gov under Forms and Resources. The instructions provide two sample

resolutions, including a corporation and LLC. If the applicant is an entity other than a corporation or LLC, then the content of the sample resolutions can be modified to reflect the applicant's legal structure. Once completed, the board-approved resolution must be uploaded within the Online Application System as a part of the Authorized Representative Request.

Question: Can an applicant use their RD Apply or eAuth login for access to ReConnect?

Answer: The ReConnect program does not use the RD Apply system. The RUS ReConnect Online Application System can be found on the ReConnect website at https://reconnect.usda.gov. A verified (Level II) eAuthentication (eAuth) account is required to access the system.

Question: Are there any application fees required in the ReConnect application?

Answer: There are no application fees required to submit an application to USDA. Certain pre-application expenses are eligible if an award is approved; however, applicants are at risk for pre-application expenses if an award is not approved.

Question: Do applicants need to submit a legal opinion? What should be included?

Response: All applicants must submit a Legal Opinion. This document should address the applicant's ability to enter into the award documents, describe all material pending litigation matters, address the applicant's ability to pledge security as required by the award documents, and address the applicant's ability to provide broadband service under state law. The legal opinion should be prepared according to the sample format available on the ReConnect website under Forms and Resources: https://www.usda.gov/reconnect/forms-and-resources. This sample can be modified to meet the applicant's needs.

Question: Why isn't my Local Network Service Revenue table calculating?

Answer: If the Local Network Service Revenue table is not generating, it may be because there are missing data on the Subscriber Projections table or Other Revenue table. Make sure to review each table carefully and update any cells with missing data. Every cell must have a value. Once you have completed the updates and saved the tables, the Local Network Services Revenue table will generate automatically in the system.

Eligibility Inquiries

Question: Who is eligible to receive the funds?

Answer: As defined in the 2019 FOA (published on December 12, 2019), the following entities are eligible to apply for assistance:

- States, local governments, or any agency, subdivision, instrumentality, or political subdivision thereof

- A territory or possession of the United States

- An Indian tribe (as defined in section 4 of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (25 U.S.C. 450b))

- Non-profit entities

- For-profit corporations

- Limited liability companies

- Cooperative or mutual organizations

Individuals and legal partnerships are not eligible for ReConnect funding. In addition, co-applicants are not eligible. If two entities would like to partner with each other in delivering broadband to areas without sufficient access, then one entity must take the lead on submitting an application. In this case, intercompany agreements can be used to account for revenues and expenses on the applicant's financial projections.

Question: I'm looking for help getting broadband internet at my residence. Is this program for me?

Answer: Individuals are not eligible for funding under this program.

Question: Is there a limit on the number of applications an entity may submit?

Answer: Yes. An entity may submit only one application. Although the online application system will allow you to create multiple applications, you can only submit one.

Question: Is an applicant eligible if current network speeds are more than 10/1 Mbps, but less than 25/3 Mbps?

Answer: If an area has 10/1 Mbps service or greater, the Proposed Funded Service Area (PFSA) is ineligible for ReConnect funds. 10/1 Mbps service for households is the minimum requirement to determine if an area has sufficient access to broadband. 25/3 Mbps is the minimum construction requirement required for all proposed projects. Applicants must propose to build a network that is capable of providing service to every premise located in the PFSA at the time the application is submitted at a speed of 25 Mbps downstream and 3 Mbps upstream.

Question: If an applicant is proposing to place fiber facilities through an ineligible area to get to an area eligible area, can the fiber facilities be used to provide service to the ineligible areas?

Answer: An applicant may propose fiber placement in an ineligible area in order to reach an eligible area. However, the applicant must fund the portion of the fiber facilities that serve the ineligible area with non-award funds. For example, if a 100-count fiber cable is proposed to pass through ineligible and eligible areas and 30 fibers will serve the ineligible area, then 30% of the total cost of the fiber facility (installation and materials) must be funded through non-ReConnect funds.

Question: Is a WISP eligible for ReConnect funds?

Answer: A Wireless Internet Service Provider (WISP) would generally be considered an eligible entity, as long as they meet all of the eligibility requirements of the program. All applicants must propose to build a network that is capable of providing service to all premises in the PFSA at a speed of 25/3 Mbps using a technology that provides fixed, terrestrial broadband service. Fixed wireless services are eligible and are considered terrestrial services.

Question: What areas are eligible for ReConnect funding?

Answer: To be eligible for ReConnect Funding, a Proposed Funded Service Area (PFSA) must be (1) rural and (2) lack sufficient access to broadband service:

1. According to the 2019 FOA, a rural area is any area which is not located within: (1) A city, town, or incorporated area that has a population of greater than 20,000 inhabitants; or (2) an urbanized area contiguous and adjacent to a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants.

2. Sufficient access to broadband is defined in the FOA as any rural area in which households have fixed, terrestrial broadband service delivering at least 10 Mbps downstream and 1 Mbps upstream. Mobile and satellite services will not be considered in making the determination of sufficient access to broadband. Note, for all funding categories, 90% of households within each proposed service area must lack sufficient access to broadband.

In addition, a PFSA may not include areas that have been previously funded by other RUS telecommunications programs, or areas covered by CAF II Auction 903 winners. The RUS Mapping Tool shows all ineligible areas and the FOA has detailed information on all eligibility requirements. Ineligible areas include:

- Non-rural areas

- Overlapping service areas

- Areas where there are pending applications for USDA Rural Utilities Service programs

- Protected Broadband Borrowers

- CAF II Auction 903 Winners

Question: If a company applies for the 100% grant product and USDA finds one location with 10/1 service, will the entire application get thrown out or can the applicant remove that PFSA from the application?

Answer: Multiple PFSAs will be treated as separate standalone service areas when determining how much of a PFSA does not have sufficient access to broadband. This means that each individual PFSA must meet the 90% eligibility requirement (90% of the households in a PFSA cannot have access to broadband service at a speed of 10 Mbps downstream and 1 Mbps upstream). If any service area in a competitive application does not meet the eligibility requirements, the entire application will be disqualified. In other words, the applicant cannot modify the application to remove one or more PFSAs that USDA finds to be ineligible.

Question: Can USDA define ineligible areas that relate to RUS lending like the RUS broadband loan, telecommunication infrastructure loan, and RUS electric loans including smart grid funding?

Answer: For the ReConnect Program only, an RUS broadband loan means any loan that has been approved or is currently under review by RUS after the beginning of Fiscal Year 2000 in the

Telecommunications Infrastructure Program, Farm Bill Broadband Program, Broadband Initiatives Program, or the ReConnect Program. Loans that were approved and then subsequently fully de-obligated are not included in this definition. RUS electric loans are also not included in this definition. If a borrower's service area is eligible for protection under the ReConnect Program, the borrower's entire service territory is protected. The service areas of Community Connect grant recipients still under build-out are also protected.

The Eligibility Area Map located on the ReConnect website at https://reconnect.usda.gov/ provides map layers for each protected type of current RUS borrower, as well as a layer that shows tribal lands. Additional layers show CAF II Auction 903 winners and features that contribute to evaluation criteria scores.

Question: How can we successfully challenge FCC 477 data?

Answer: FCC 477 data is one source of information that USDA will consider in its review of applications. However, it is not used as a sole source of information to validate 10/1 Mbps service. To challenge FCC data, please contact the FCC.

Question: Can a competitive local exchange carrier (CLEC) apply for funding?

Answer: A CLEC is an eligible entity as long as they meet all eligibility requirements as outlined in the FY2020 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA).

Question: Are legal partnerships eligible to apply for ReConnect funding?

Answer: No, legal partnerships and individuals are not eligible.

Question: Can applicants apply for more than one service area?

Answer: A single application may propose multiple service areas. For eligibility purposes, if an applicant is applying for multiple PFSAs, each service area will be evaluated on a stand-alone basis.

Required Documents Inquiries

Question: How do I know which organizational documents I will need to submit?

Answer: The Online Application System will automatically generate the required documents based on the legal entity type chosen. The Application Guide details the required documents for each entity type, and is available on the ReConnect website at https://reconnect.usda.gov under Forms and Resources.

Question: For letters of support, who should they be addressed to?

Answer: Letters of support may be included in the application. If an applicant chooses to include letters of support, they may be uploaded to the documents section within the Online Application System and addressed to Ms. Laurel Leverrier, Acting Assistant Administrator Telecommunications Program, Rural Utilities Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Please note, letters of support are not required.

Environmental Inquiries

Question: Can a previous environmental study be used in the application process if it covers 90% of the PFSA?

Answer: An applicant must provide an environmental analysis of all proposed funded service areas (PFSAs) within an application to be eligible. A recent environmental study could be used to satisfy or support the environmental information requested; but additional information will be required for areas not supported by the existing study at the time of the application. Applicants should also update any changes since the current study, so all current environmental information is represented within the application.

Question: What will be required for the environmental portion of the application? Are maps required of the planned routes if claiming categorical exclusions?

Answer: Project maps or site plans are required to identify cable routes, building locations, tower locations, equipment locations, and all structures and facilities that are part of the project.

Applicants will be required to draw sites and routes using the Construction Mapping Tool in the ReConnect Online Application System. The Application System will also require that applicants provide specific information on the cable routes and facility locations including the completion of Environmental Questionnaires (EQs). All project activities, specific project locations, and supporting documentation must be provided to assist the Agency's analysis of potential impacts on the environment, including whether a categorical exclusion applies to an area in a proposed project.

The Application Guide addresses the specific requirements for the environmental portion of the application.

Question: If an area is predominantly National Forest, but people live there and an applicant wants to place a tower structure, does the applicant work with the National Forest or just the private property owner?

Answer: If the map shows the area as Forest Service property, the applicant must work with the U.S. Forest Service unless the applicant has proof that it is private property. The specifics of the property will need to be analyzed and the applicant must prove that the property is private and not Forest Service owned.

Question: Does an applicant need to contact USDA about EA or EIS before submission?

Answer: Yes. If an applicant indicates "Yes" for either the Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) questions on the application, the applicant must contact RUS at reconnectenvironmental@usda.gov for further guidance. The Application System will require an upload as proof that the applicant has contacted USDA.

Question: The Environmental section indicates that I am required to submit a Section 106 Environmental Questionnaire. How is the Application System determining that requirement?

Answer: The Application System automatically determines whether your project requires a Section 106 Environmental Questionnaire (EQ). Below are all of the Site/Route description scenarios that would trigger a Section 106 EQ to be completed for a proposed project.

Please note that these are the system requirements. If you believe the system is requiring a Section 106 EQ in error, or have any additional questions about this issue, please submit a question through the Contact Us form within the Application System.

Sites and/or Routes:
- Is asset located on Tribal land – **Yes**, Section 106 becomes required.
- Is asset located on or cross Federally Managed Land – **Yes**, Section 106 becomes required.

Routes:
- Is the route in a previously developed, existing right-of-way? **No, a new right-of-way or easement will be required**, Section 106 becomes required.
- No matter the answer for question, "*Is the route in a previously developed, existing right-of-way?*", if the installation method is either **'Aerial Cables on New Poles'** or **'Underwater'**, Section 106 becomes required.

- No matter the answer for question, "*Is the route in a previously-developed, existing right-of-way?*" if the answer to question, "Will associated cabinets or underground vaults be installed nearby in previously-disturbed or developed land?" is either **'No'** or **'Both in disturbed and undisturbed land'**, Section 106 becomes required.

Site - Building:

- Is this an existing site or a site to be constructed? **To Be Constructed**
- Will the improvements require ground disturbance? **Yes**
- Is a FCC license required for any of the equipment? **Yes**
- Please select the type(s) of generator(s) that will be installed: **Primary generator**
- Are you collocating, upgrading, or installing a new antenna? **New**
- ***WHEN*** What is the estimated year in which the existing tower was constructed? **>49 years old**

Site - Tower:

- Is this an existing tower or a tower to be constructed? **To Be Constructed**
- Is a FCC license required for this tower/pole? **Yes**
- Is a FCC license required for any of the equipment? **Yes**
- Please select the type(s) of generator(s) that will be installed: **Primary generator**
- Are you collocating, upgrading, or installing a new antenna? **New**
- ***WHEN*** What is the estimated year in which the existing tower was constructed? **>49 years old**

Site - Access Road/Parking Lot:

- Is this an upgrade to an existing access road/parking lot, construction of a new access road/parking lot, or expansion of a new access road/parking lot? **'Construction of a new access road/parking lot'** or **'Expansion of a new access road/parking lot'**

Site - Large Enclosure:

- Is this an existing cabinet or a cabinet to be constructed? **To Be Constructed**
- Please select the type(s) of generator(s) that will be installed: **Primary generator**
- Will the improvements require ground disturbance? **Yes**
- Is a FCC license required for any of the equipment? **Yes**

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Evaluation Criteria and Scoring Inquiries

Question: Where can applicants find an explanation of application evaluation points?

Answer: The application evaluation point system is provided in the FY2020 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) that was published on December 12, 2019. The Evaluation Criteria can also be found at https://reconnect.usda.gov under Scoring Criteria. Additional information will be provided in the Application Guide that will be published prior to the start of accepting applications.

Question: What are the application evaluation criteria?

Answer: Applications for the 50/50 loan-grant combination and 100% grants will be scored and ranked against the following criteria. Please consult the FY2020 FOA for details on the criteria:

- **Rurality of Proposed Funded Service Area** (25 Points): Applicants receive 25 points for serving the least dense rural areas as measured by the population of the PFSA per square mile, or if the PFSA is located at least one hundred miles from a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants.

- **Farms Served (20 Points):** Applicants receive 1 point for every 10 farms served up to a maximum of 20 points. Farms will be counted using the GIS layer located in the RUS Mapping Tool, which is based on the 2017 Census of Agriculture data.

- **Performance of the Offered Service** (20 Points): Applicants receive 20 points for projects that propose to build a network capable of providing at least 100 Mbps symmetrical service to all premises. Note that the certification from the professional engineer (PE) must certify that the proposed system can deliver these speeds to every premise in the PFSA.

- **Businesses (15 Points)**: Applicants receive 1 point for each business that pre-subscribes for broadband service up to a maximum of 15 points. Applicants are required to submit signed pre-subscription forms to receive points for businesses.

- **Healthcare Centers** (15 Points): Applicants receive 1 point for every healthcare center served for a maximum of 15 points. Healthcare centers will be identified using the GIS layer located in the RUS Mapping Tool.

- **Educational Facilities** (15 Points): Applicants receive 1 point for every educational facility served for a maximum of 15 points. Educational facilities will be identified using the GIS layer located in the RUS Mapping Tool.

- **Essential Community Facilities (15 Points)**: Applicants receive 1 point for every essential community facility served for a maximum of 15 points. Facilities will be identified using the GIS layer located in the RUS Mapping Tool.

- **Opportunity Zones** (5 Points): Applicants receive 5 points for an application that proposes to provide service in at least part of an area identified as an Opportunity Zone. Opportunity Zones will be analyzed using the GIS layer located in the Mapping Tool. This criterion is new; it was added in the FY2020 FOA.

- **State or Tribal Broadband Activity** (20 Points): Applicants receive up to 20 points for State or tribal broadband activity, broken down as follows:

  - 10 points for projects that are in a State or tribal area that has a broadband plan that has been updated within five years of the date of publication of this FOA;
  - An additional 5 points for projects located in states that do not restrict utilities from delivering broadband service;
  - And, 5 more points for projects located in states that expedite right-of way and environmental requirements.

  Applicants are required to submit evidence from the appropriate State or tribal official demonstrating the above stipulations. If the project is in multiple states, an applicant must supply supporting information for each state in the project. For projects located wholly in tribal areas, a letter from a tribal leader may be used to claim points.

Question: How is population density (or rurality) calculated for application points?

Answer: For the purposes of the ReConnect Program, rurality is measured in one of two ways: 1) if the population of the proposed funded service area per square mile is 6 or less, or 2) if the proposed funded service area is located at least 100 miles from a population center (a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants). If multiple service areas are proposed, the density calculation will be made on the combined areas as if they were a single area, and not the average densities. Please note, areas with population densities with fewer people per square mile will receive the same number of points as areas with 6 people per square mile. No partial points will be awarded for other densities.

Additionally, applications can only receive the score once and will not receive extra points for satisfying both criteria described above. For the FY2020 FOA, a layer has been added to the Service Area Mapping Tool that shows distance from population centers. The Application System will automatically calculate rurality points.

Question: For purposes of the Reconnect Program application evaluation criteria, are ranches and dairies considered farms or businesses?

Answer: According to the FY2020FOA, a farm is defined as any place from which $1,000 or more of agricultural products were sold or would normally be sold during the year. A business is defined as a commercial or mercantile activity engaged in as a means of livelihood. The ReConnect program counts farms separately from businesses for scoring purposes.

Farms will be counted automatically by the Service Area Mapping Tool in the Application System. Farms included in the GIS layer of the Mapping Tool are determined by the 2017 Census of Agriculture. Applicants are no longer required to submit pre-subscription forms for farms.

Question: Do I need to have businesses complete pre-subscriber forms?

Answer: Yes, applicants will receive 1 point for each business that pre-subscribes for broadband service up to a maximum of 15 points. Applicants must have the owner of the business sign the presubscription form provided in the Application System and submit them as part of their application. The form can also be found on the ReConnect website at https://reconnect.usda.gov under Forms and Resources.

Question: Essential Community Facilities, Healthcare Centers and Educational Facilities in my area are missing from the map, how do I get these added?

Answer: There is not a challenge process for missing facilities in these datasets, and there will not be an opportunity under this FOA to submit additional facilities for consideration. An exception to this is if the missing facility is located on tribal land. If this is the case, an applicant can submit documentation from the tribal leader identifying the missing facility and stating that it is currently being used for the indicated purpose. This information is further outlined in the FY2020 FOA.

Question: Farms in my area are missing from the map, how do I get these added?

Answer: There is not a challenge process for missing farms in these datasets, and there will not be an opportunity under this FOA to submit additional farms for consideration. There are two exceptions to this rule:

1. If the missing farm is located on tribal land, an applicant can submit documentation from the tribal leader identifying the missing farm; or

2. Projects located in a territory or possession of the United States can submit documentation that supports the number of farms not identified and get the associated points.

Question: If the GIS layer in the RUS mapping tool does not adequately identify farms located on tribal lands, can the tribal leader of the area in question submit documentation that supports farms not identified and get the associated points?

Answer: For farms in tribal areas not identified in the GIS layer, the tribal leader of the area can submit documentation supporting the number of farms in the PFSA and will receive 1 point for every 10 ten farms identified in the PFSA up to a total of 20 points. A certification that the facilities exist and meet the definition for a farm and are being used must be submitted by the tribal leader.

Question: What is an Opportunity Zone?

Answer: An opportunity zone is an economically-distressed community where new investments, under certain conditions, may be eligible for preferential tax treatment. Localities qualify as opportunity zones if they have been nominated for that designation by the state and that nomination has been certified by the Secretary of the U.S. Treasury via his delegation of authority to the Internal Revenue Service.

Question: How can I ensure that my project receives the maximum points possible under the state broadband activity section?

Answer: The following actions should be taken to ensure that the maximum possible points are derived from the state broadband activity section:

- To receive the 10 points under the state broadband plan, applicants will be required to submit evidence from the appropriate State or tribal official that a broadband plan has been adopted or recognized by the state government as the official state broadband plan, that the plan has been updated or information has been added to the plan in the last five years from the date of the publication of the FOA, and provides the web site (URL) where the plan is being made publicly available.

- To receive the additional 5 points that will be awarded to projects located in states that do not restrict utilities, please ensure that the certification letter signed by the governor in the appropriate state(s) confirms that there are no restrictions on utilities participating in the provision of

broadband service in the state. Documentation for this item can include examples of laws, regulations, or similar legal documents which indicate that utilities can engage in the provision of broadband service.

- To receive the addition 5 points for projects located in states that expedite right-of-way and environmental requirements, please ensure that the certification letter signed by the governor in the appropriate state(s) confirms that there are procedures in place for expediting administrative activities for completing right-of-way and environmental permitting requirements that can be executed for the project if necessary, in order to meet the Agency's project build-out timelines. Documentation for this item can include examples of laws, regulations, procedures, or other similar documents which indicate that there are procedures in place for expediting administrative activities for completing right-of-way and environmental permitting requirements.

Question: Are the evaluation criteria datasets available?

Answer: USDA has made the datasets that are used to determine special evaluation criteria available to download. These datasets represent a specific moment in time and will not be modified during the course of the current FOA, nor can the data be challenged. The Special Evaluation Criteria Datasets available for download include: Essential Community Facilities, Educational Facilities, Healthcare Facilities, Number of Farms by County, Opportunity Zones, and Rurality – 100 Miles from Urbanized Areas. Additionally, a Tribal areas layer is included on the Eligible Area Map for reference. More information about the Eligibility Area Map Datasets can be found on the ReConnect website here: https://www.usda.gov/reconnect/eligibility-area-map-datasets.

Certifications Inquires

Question: Does it matter what type of Professional Engineer (PE) certifies the Project?

Answer: Per the FY2020 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), all applicants are required to submit a Network Design, Network Diagram, Project Costs, and Buildout Timeline and Milestones, all of which must be certified by a PE. The PE must be licensed in at least one of the states where the project will be constructed. The selection of the PE does not require prior RUS approval; however, it is the responsibility of the applicant to hire PEs who are experienced in the design and construction of broadband networks.

Question: What certifications must an applicant sign?

Answer: All applicants must sign and submit the following certifications within the Online Application System. The only security role that can sign and certify each item is the Representative-Signature-Certifier (Rep-Sign-Cert).

Required certifications:

- Certification Regarding Architectural Barriers

- Certification Regarding Debarment, Suspension, and Other Responsibility Matters – Primary Covered Transactions

- Certificate Regarding Flood Hazard Area Precautions

- Certification Regarding Lobbying for Contracts, Grants, Loans and Cooperative Agreements

- Civil Rights Compliance Certification

- Federal Collection Policies for Commercial Debt Certification

- Representations Regarding Felony Conviction (Required only for Non-profit, For-profit corporations, and Cooperatives and Mutual Organizations)

- Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970

- Compliance with RUS Award Documents

Some of the certifications on this list require the applicant to answer questions or upload documents before signing.

In addition, other parts of the application require certifications that vary according to the specifics of each proposed project. For further guidance, please consult the FY2020 FOA available on the ReConnect website at https://reconnect.usda.gov under Forms and Resources. The Application Guide also provides additional details and is available on the ReConnect website.