



Discussion Topic

June, 2008

A monthly resource for the Community Action Groups of Michigan Farm Bureau

QUESTIONS

1. What's the potential in your area for high-speed Internet connections? Why is the latest technology important?
2. How can local sales be increased by using the Internet to promote your business?
3. What can your county Farm Bureau do to encourage high-speed Internet access? What can you do personally?

High-speed Internet access: Are farmers falling behind?

Near the turn of the 20th century, the population of the United States shifted from being mostly rural to being mostly urban. It would change the country forever. The transition to an urban-based population didn't stop electricity and telephony services from reaching rural areas, but country dwellers had to wait a little longer. Today, with 80 percent of the U.S. population living in cities, according to the 2000 Census, rural areas are increasingly being left behind, because modern communication now requires a broadband Internet connection.

According to the USDA, nearly half (47 percent) of US farms still use a traditional dial-up Internet connection. In the meantime, the size of the average Web site has tripled over the past 5 years. As technology continues to move forward, more and more services will be based from the home Internet connection. Major cable television providers have already started rolling out home phone services that operate over the Internet. The next generation of on-demand television services will also require a high-speed connection.

Computerworld Magazine summed up this issue succinctly in August of 2007:

"Rural areas need broadband. But deregulation has freed carriers from any real obligation to offer it. The market will never provide universal broadband access without regulation or subsidies, but the U.S. lacks both a coherent policy and the political will to address the issue. Even as the telephony infrastructure itself is absorbed into the Internet, some policy-makers still fail to view broadband as the new critical infrastructure."

The broadband issue isn't just a rural one, either. The Information Technology and Innovation Foundation's 2008 Broadband Rankings show the United States at 15th place for total broadband penetration world-wide. The U.S. position in these rankings has fallen every year since 2001. Although telecommunications companies often try to make the case that this country's low population density is to blame, it's becoming harder and harder to accept when countries such as Canada rank above the U.S.

Despite these trends, there are some alternatives that farmers and other members of the rural community have yet to explore. Satellite