

Congress OKs Greater Broadband Access

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WASHINGTON -- Congress has passed legislation that will require the government to keep closer tabs on who has access to the Internet and who does not.

Supporters hope the Broadband Data Improvement Act will help policymakers better identify areas of the country that are falling behind when it comes to high-speed Internet access.

The bill passed both houses of Congress, with the Senate approving a final version Tuesday on a voice vote.

Senate sponsor Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, said the federal government has a responsibility to make sure Americans have access to the Internet, but "we cannot manage what we do not measure."

The Federal Communications Commission collects data on broadband use, but its methods have been criticized as outdated. The commission voted in March to greatly improve its data collection. Broadband providers will be required to provide subscription numbers by Census tract, speed and type of technology.

The legislation passed by Congress goes further. It requires the FCC to conduct consumer surveys of broadband use in urban, suburban and rural areas, as well as large and small business markets. Survey questions will include the cost of access and data transmission speeds.

The legislation requires the agency to compile a list of locales that lack broadband service and determine population and income levels in those areas.

The bill also requires the Census Bureau to add questions about Internet use on its survey. Residents will be asked whether they have a computer, whether they have Internet access and, if so, whether they have a dial-up or broadband connection.

It also orders the Government Accountability Office to study broadband speeds and costs and to compare the "availability and quality of broadband offerings" in the U.S. to other industrialized nations.

Such an analysis might provide some insight as to why the U.S. — the birthplace of the Internet — lags behind other developed countries in broadband usage. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ranks the U.S. 15th for broadband penetration.

Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., who sponsored a similar bill that passed the House earlier this year, supported the legislation.

"This initiative will help us ascertain whether the nation is achieving its broadband policy goals because, unfortunately, our current knowledge on the state of broadband deployment, speed and affordability in the U.S. is grossly and inexcusably lacking," Markey said.

The bill is S. 1492.

On the Net:

Bill text: <http://www.thomas.loc.gov>