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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

BEAD Update: Where Non-Deployment Dollars Should Go & the Starlink Question

With the *Trump* administration's restructuring of the \$42 billion Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) program and "Benefit of the Bargain" reforms, the initiative is expected to have about \$21 billion in leftover funds. How will that money be spent?

"We are really trying to get ideas and to see what kind of fits this moment," NTIA Chief of Staff *Brooke Donilon* told attendees at the **Incompas Policy Summit** this week. Donilon, who moved to NTIA from her role as **NCTA** VP, Government Relations last spring, stressed that no decisions have been made yet for the funds. NTIA has a [listening session](#) scheduled for Feb 11 on the subject.

A panel at the Incompas event Wednesday tackled the topic, with—no surprise—permitting assistance ranking as one of the recommendations for nondeployment funds. "The reality is, a lot of these municipalities aren't holding up permits because they want to. It's because they lack resources," said **Conterra Network** Senior Counsel *Ben Sanborn*.

That other P-word—pole attachments—could be another beneficiary. "For some of these roadblocks and stumbling spots where, gosh, there's no money to replace the poles because nobody wants to bear the responsibility, we should look at those non-deployment funds being used for some of those types of issues," said **Crown Castle** Associate General Counsel/Government Relations *Rebecca Hussey*.

FiberCom CEO *Brendan West* seconded that idea, noting it would help both broadband and power companies. He also suggested some of BEAD's non-deployment funds could go toward professional utility locators for broadband projects. These are the workers who go out to identify where underground lines for gas, water and electricity are buried. "You might not know it, but they get paid usually under \$20 an hour. They get training for two weeks," he said. "The fact that we have locator companies that are only training for two weeks for one of the most dangerous underground jobs there is when it comes to anything near gas or power, it's a little scary, so let's take some of that money to help."

Expect to hear plenty more ideas at NTIA's two-hour listening next week, but it will be a lightning round with each speaker being limited to no more than 2 minutes.

As for the state of the BEAD, Donilon painted a rosy picture. "We have a vast number of participants in the program. The program is still 62% fiber across the board, but now there are other technologies like unlicensed fixed wireless and satellite and fixed wireless. We not only saw competition among the technologies, but we saw different fiber providers going head-to-head, competing," she said. "Before this, fiber providers didn't want to participate because of the rate regulation or the climate change mandates or the labor requirements, and all of a sudden, now new fiber providers are coming to participate."

A big beneficiary of BEAD changes is LEO broadband provider **Starlink**. Word came late last month that Starlink is asking

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states to [sign waivers](#) that its service may not meet some of the metrics promised during the bid process. **New Street Research's Blair Levin** spotlighted a just-released NTIA [FAQ](#) that he said appears to advise states not to sign.

"While the language in the final bullet... does not clearly mandate that states may not sign the proposed contract riders, the totality of the advice appears to advise states not to sign the contract riders," Levin wrote in a research note Thursday.

If states refuse to sign, he said Starlink could lobby Commerce Secretary *Howard Lutnick* to overturn the guidance, but he sees that as unlikely. Another possible scenario would be for Starlink to not sign a state contract and threaten to sue the state. "While we think the states would be highly likely to win such litigation, the litigation could delay state action which, as we have explained before, benefits Starlink by delaying federal funds for Starlink's competitors," Levin wrote, suggesting that states might respond by shifting Starlink funds to rival **Amazon Leo**.

A third option would have Starlink sign the state agreements, but during implementation challenge any state enforcement action inconsistent with the proposed waivers. "While we think Starlink's litigation position would be weak, at that point, it would be very difficult to bring in a new service. Further, Starlink could use fines imposed for failure to meet performance metrics as an excuse to raise rates, as Starlink will be a monopolist not subject to rate regulation," the analyst wrote.

The bottom line is Levin doesn't see any scenario resulting in terrestrial-based services getting a new opportunity to bid for BEAD funds. "There is too much complexity, and it would take a long time to do so," he said.

Fiber Broadband Association was quick to applaud the NTIA guidance. "BEAD was established as a bipartisan, state-led program with clear and consistent rules to ensure accountability, oversight and long-term value for taxpayers and communities, and those rules must be applied uniformly to all participants," the group said. "We appreciate NTIA's guidance as states implement this complex program, and state broadband offices should be fully empowered to enforce BEAD requirements and reject contract provisions that weaken transparency, oversight, or accountability."

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VERIZON SUES T-MOBILE

Verizon is taking **T-Mobile** to court over claims of intentional false advertising. In a complaint filed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, Verizon alleged T-Mobile is running a deceptive nationwide ad campaign that features a claim that customers who switch from Verizon

to T-Mobile can save more than \$1,000 per year. It's the same T-Mobile campaign that's been under scrutiny by both the **National Advertising Division** and **National Advertising Review Board**, where T-Mobile [failed to comply](#) with recommendations. Verizon wrote that T-Mobile mischaracterizes each company's costs since it compares promotional rates against standard prices. It also noted T-Mobile's online price savings calculator incorrectly shows optional benefits as add-on costs, in addition to wrongly accounting for promotional savings people get with Verizon's streaming bundles. Verizon is seeking damages and an immediate injunction to halt the ad campaign. "T-Mobile's reliance on faulty comparative pricing reflects a pattern of deception, as it has doubled down on these tactics even after the National Advertising Division (NAD) recommended that T-Mobile discontinue these types of false cost savings claims," Verizon said in its complaint. "Because these deceptive claims cause irreparable harm to Verizon's brand and market position, Verizon seeks to enjoin T-Mobile's campaign." T-Mobile has to file a response to the complaint next month.

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FCC SIDES WITH COMCAST IN POLE COMPLAINT

Comcast got a win at the **FCC** regarding its pole attachment complaint against **Appalachian Power Company**. The Commission ruled Thursday that in situations where a pole owned by Appalachian Power has preexisting safety violations or repair requirements, it can't charge Comcast—or any broadband provider—the full cost of replacement, finding the action unlawful under the Communications Act and FCC rules. Instead, Comcast only needs to pay the incremental cost of installing a stronger/taller pole. The FCC called the decision "precedent-setting," with the decision the first of its kind from the agency's new process for expedited review of pole attachment complaints. "We applaud this decision and urge Appalachian Power to act quickly to resolve pole access issues so consumers can benefit from timely, affordable high-speed Internet," a Comcast spokesperson said in a statement to **CFX**. Comcast [filed the complaint](#) against the Virginia-based utility on Nov. 25. Two weeks later, the FCC approved the operator's request for an [accelerated docket](#) since it was limited to one, discrete legal issue. The agency's Rapid Broadband Assessment Team—composed of staff from the Enforcement and Wireline Competition Bureaus—oversaw the development of a record with the Commission adopting the order within 60 days of the complaint's filing.

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ELLISON CALLS WBD-NETFLIX COMBO “MONOPOLISTIC”

Paramount Skydance CEO *David Ellison* may have skipped the Senate Judiciary’s [antitrust hearing](#) this week because he felt it wasn’t “useful” to appear, but that’s by no means his final word on the matter. In an open letter obtained by the trades, Ellison made his case to UK creatives regarding why a **Netflix-Warner Bros. Discovery** merger would be bad for showbiz, writing that creators and audiences are “best served by greater choice ... and by a marketplace that encourages the full spectrum of filmmaking, content creation and theatrical exhibition, not one that eliminates meaningful competition by creating a monopolistic or dominant entity.” Ellison, who has met with U.K. regulators about the WBD transaction, added that PSKY’s proposed combo is “intended to strengthen competition by creating a more capable and effective rival to the dominant platforms,” which is “in stark construct to Netflix’s path.” PSKY is also committed to a minimum 45-day release window for theatrical films, a point of contention when it comes to Netflix, which usually releases its own movies straight to the platform without ever putting them in cinemas. During the hearing Tuesday, Netflix co-CEO *Ted Sarandos* reiterated that the streaming giant would maintain the window for WB films and continue to invest in the movie studios it would acquire in the merger. WBD’s shareholders have until Feb. 20 to tender their shares to PSKY and reject the Netflix deal.

SAMPATH STEPS DOWN

There were [murmurs](#) earlier this week that **Verizon** might be looking for someone new to lead its consumer unit, but now it’s official. The company announced that *Sowmyanarayan Sampath* agreed to step down as Verizon Consumer Group CEO at the end of 1Q26. He entered the job nearly three years ago after a brief stint as Verizon Business’ CEO, having first joined the company in 2014 as SVP, Business Transformation. Filling in on an interim basis will be *Alfonso Villanueva*, who became Verizon’s EVP/CTO shortly after *Dan Schulman* began running the company. Villanueva and Schulman worked together at PayPal, where the former served as EVP, Strategy, Corporate Development and Data Science and the latter held the President/CEO seat. Villanueva was also a Senior Partner at McKinsey & Company, where he led its TMT practice in the Asia Pacific region. Additionally, he was Chief Innovation Officer at Singaporean operator **SingTel** and helped create its digital division and venture fund.

NEW STATION IN TOWN

A new, full-power broadcast station is coming to Florida’s Orlando-Daytona Beach-Melbourne DMA. **Hemisphere Media Group** and **Entravision** teamed up to launch **WAPA Orlando**, a channel that’ll air content from Puerto Rican-based WAPA-TV with a focus on Central Florida’s Latino population. Initial

distribution includes **Comcast’s** Xfinity, **Charter’s** Spectrum, **DirectTV**, **Dish**, **AT&T U-Verse** and others. WAPA-TV produces 80 hours of original content per week. Entravision, meanwhile, will create and manage WAPA Orlando’s digital playbook, in addition to operating the sales unit.

FIBER FRENZY

Charter will connect the Kentucky counties of Bath, Marion, Mason, Washington and Montgomery to Spectrum services. In total, the operator is bringing online more than 7,000 homes and businesses in unserved or underserved areas.

DOING GOOD

Applications are now [open](#) for **Charter’s** 2026 Spectrum Digital Education program, which will award \$1 million in grants to local nonprofits in Charter’s footprint that are helping their communities build their digital skills as well as access the tools and devices they need to succeed in their education, careers and everyday lives. The grant supports initiatives such as digital literacy programs, workforce readiness training and efforts that provide donated or affordable devices. Since 2017, Charter has awarded 382 grants to 202 orgs, benefitting over 200,000 community members across 41 states. This year’s awards will bring Charter’s total investment to more than \$12 million. Nonprofits have until Feb. 27 to apply.

RATINGS

Fox News once again took the top spots across weekly prime-time and total-day ratings among cable networks. Fox News had 2.57 million viewers P2+ in prime, while **ESPN** and **MS Now** trailed with 1.4 million and 1.24 million, respectively. ESPN got some help Saturday from airing its two most-watched college basketball games of the season so far, led by Kentucky-Arkansas (2.4 million) and BYU-Kansas (2.1 million). The Australian Open contributed to ESPN’s total day audience after the men’s final averaged 730,000 viewers and the women’s title bout posted 487,000, driving the network’s weekly figure to 709,000. That still trailed Fox News at 1.66 million and MS Now with 756,000, but finished ahead of **CNN’s** 590,000 and **HGTV’s** 393,000.

PROGRAMMING

CNN set a new original series, “Craig Ferguson: American On Purpose,” which will follow the comedian and former late-night host as he travels across the country to unpack the nation’s “chaotic, triumphant and controversial 250-year journey of independence.” The show, which will premiere later this year, comes just in time for the semiquincentennial. – **AMC Networks** greenlit a fifth season of its crime drama “Dark Winds.” It will begin filming eight new episodes in March for a 2027 premiere.

PROGRAMMER'S PAGE

Going Long: Puppy Bowl's Impressive Run

Sunday is the big game. No, not that one. The Puppy Bowl is back for its 22nd year, with adoptable pups tumbling around a tiny football field once again. What's the secret to keeping this feel-good stunt going year after year? "It's recognizing that the heart and soul of the show is the puppies. We try to keep things simple and fun and lighthearted, all while making sure that the puppies are the stars of the show," said *Joseph Boyle*, Head of Content for **Discovery**. That doesn't mean the Puppy Bowl can't learn some new tricks. This year's three-hour canine extravaganza, which simulcasts across **Animal Planet**, **Discovery**, **TBS**, **truTV**, **HBO Max** and **discovery+** starting at 2pm ET/11am PT Sunday, will spotlight senior dogs for the first time in a special exhibition game—Team Oldies vs. Team Goldies. Those kinds of thoughtful evolutions keep Puppy Bowl fresh. "Everyone loves working on the show because of its mission. We brainstorm ideas all year long and then find the right way to try them out in show," said Boyle. "As for must-haves, it all comes down to the puppies first and foremost. Our amazing shelter partners are so dedicated to the event every year. Without them, there would be no Puppy Bowl. Also, Dan the Ref [Dan Schachner]. His love for the pups and his commitment to the mission of Puppy Bowl is apparent in every frame." Puppy Bowl 2026 features a record-breaking 150 dogs from 72 shelters in the U.S., Puerto Rico and British Virgin Islands. Other special touches include a behind-the-scenes look at shelter staff cheering on their puppy players, a doggy training session with Buffalo Bills wide receiver *Khalil Shakir* and a boatload of sponsors, including a tailgate party hosted by Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers, with an appearance by founder *Todd Graves* and his pooch Cane III. – *Amy Maclean*

REVIEWS

"Hijack," streaming, new eps Wednesdays, **Apple TV**. For most series, our advice is viewers can begin watching without having seen the first season. We'd modify that for "Hijack," whose main character, Sam Nelson (an intense *Idris Elba*) essentially is the series. Particularly for Season 2, which finds Nelson in the operator's car of a local Berlin train in the role of, you guessed it, a hijacker. Of course, if you'd seen this series' initial season, an airborne-based, nail-biting collection of eps, you might not have guessed that the usually sweaty, disheveled Nelson is the villain this time. His bravery and smarts thwarted the hijacking of an international flight. Perhaps he's not this season's villain either, we'll see. Still, familiarity with his situation from S1 is important to have, but not critical to enjoy the ride. *Toby Jones* as a British spy chief and several excellent German actors are window dressing in this slower, by comparison, thriller that, pun intended, has railroaded viewers into discovering Sam's truth. –"The Pitt," streaming, new eps Thursdays, **HBO**. Yes, nearly every member of the hospital's staff is beautiful/handsome and, gosh, most of them have a bedside manner that makes "Marcus Welby M.D." seem uncaring. Still, the variety of characters, stories and fine performances, combined with peripatetic camera work and the shift-per-season concept make for a powerful formula. – *Seth Arenstein*

BASIC CABLE		
P2+ PRIME RANKINGS*		
(01/26/26-02/01/26)		
MON-SUN	MC	MC
	US	US AA
	AA%	(000)
FNC	0.784	2524
MS NOW	0.376	1211
ESPN	0.325	1046
CNN	0.254	818
HGTV	0.227	730
TLC	0.195	629
HIST	0.160	515
FOOD	0.157	505
TBS	0.153	493
HALL	0.143	459
USA	0.133	428
DISC	0.131	421
INSP	0.130	418
A&E	0.128	413
TV LAND	0.128	412
GSN	0.111	357
FX	0.102	329
ID	0.100	322
BRAVO	0.100	321
ESPN2	0.094	302
NAN	0.090	291
OXY	0.088	284
AMC	0.088	282
HALLMYS	0.088	282
LIFE	0.087	280
COM	0.072	231
WETV	0.070	226
REELZ	0.070	226
NWSMX	0.069	223
BET	0.068	219
FRFM	0.066	212
NATGEO	0.063	201
ADSM	0.061	197
PRMNT	0.057	183
FETV	0.057	182

*P2+ L+SD rankers are based on national Nielsen numbers, not coverage.



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