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Internet access still a wish for many in rural areas

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Fred Pilot lives within earshot of busy Highway 50.

Proximity to a modern roadway, however, hasn't helped him gain the kind of cheap Internet access that most people these days take for granted.

The 55-year-old Camino resident lives just out of the reach of AT&T's Internet service and Comcast's cable network.

He endured years of sluggish Web service before finally being pulled onto the information superhighway by one of the small wireless providers that have emerged to fill rural Internet voids in the region.

Millions of Americans in sparsely populated areas deemed unprofitable by large communications companies remain without broadband Internet access.

Pilot, a freelance journalist and newsletter editor, had been so frustrated by the lack of broadband service, he started a blog – eldotelecom.blogspot.com – on the topic about two years ago.

Now, he hopes President-elect Barack Obama's promise last week of broadband Internet access for every corner of the country will change things for rural residents.

"It's unacceptable that the United States ranks 15th in the world in broadband adoption," Obama said in his address. "Here in the country that invented the Internet, every child should have a chance to get online."

Obama is climbing aboard a bandwagon occupied by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who last year launched the Broadband Task Force. That group earlier this year said about 1.4 million state residents are off the high-speed broadband path.

"Those counties in California that are relatively low on broadband access, even with a relatively small investment, they can reap really big benefits," said Kristin Van Gaasbeck, associate professor of economics at California State University, Sacramento.

Gaasbeck said broadband Internet allows people to be more productive, saving time for additional work or leisure.

"The idea that you go to work and do your job and then you come home and they are separate, doesn't exist any more," Gaasbeck said.

She said communal Internet hubs could be offered in underserved rural communities.

California would see a gain of 1.8 million jobs and \$132 million in payroll over 10 years if broadband Internet use among adults is increased by 3.8 percent annually, according to a report prepared last year by Gaasbeck and other analysts for the Sacramento Regional Research Institute.

Carol Anne Ogdin, a Placerville planning commissioner and owner of Deep Woods Technology, a consulting company, has been trying to get that message across to El Dorado County leaders for years.

"El Dorado County and other rural parts of California are becoming an economic backwater because citizens are being deprived," Ogdin said. "It is as if roads were built only in urban areas and we in the rural areas were consigned to dirt and gravel."

Pilot also has tried to persuade county leaders to install fiber optic cables when putting in utility lines. They could collect rent from Internet providers, he said.

"I think it's difficult for a public agency to think of a public-private partnership," Pilot said. "I think that's what I went up against. ... We're a little behind here. I think it will start picking up."

In the meantime, Pilot and other residents who live off the beaten path are generally paying more than urban dwellers – Pilot pays about \$70 a month – for high-speed broadband service.

Entrepreneurs equip rural homes and businesses with antennas that intercept line-of-sight radio transmissions. They are working hard to reach an untapped market.

Rob Graf started Sierra Advantage Inc. in 2007. He offers land-line and wireless service over a 600-square-mile area in western El Dorado County.

He said he has 1,200 people, out of range of his equipment, waiting for installation.

Demand is high despite a recent influx of funding from the nonprofit Sierra Economic Development Corp. that allowed Graf to grow his company by about 30 percent. The funds were used to install more wireless access points to reach more customers.

Wireless Internet service providers, or WISPs, are critical in rural areas, said Brent Smith director and CEO of the Sierra Economic Development Corp. "They offer the greatest promise."

Last spring, a loan to Digital Path brought big changes to Sierra County. Before the loan there was almost no broadband Internet. Today, half the county has broadband access, Smith said.

"We're very proud of it," Smith said. "It makes me smile. Hundreds of people that didn't have broadband Internet now have it."

The economic development corporation is among seven agencies the state has contracted with through its California Emerging Technology Fund for rural Internet access. The Sierra Economic Development Corp. is the only one that offers loans.

The Auburn-based agency reaches out to residents in El Dorado, Nevada, Placer, Sierra and Alpine counties. Of the 425,000 people in that area, 215,000 are in rural areas scattered over a huge area of steep mountains and narrow valleys where it's too difficult to run cable, Smith said.

Economic development corporation staff surveyed 2,000 residents in that area.

"We found that there is plenty of demand and that people are willing to pay a reasonable amount (for broadband Internet)," Smith said.

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