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Agency gauges north state Internet needs

By [David Benda](#) ([Contact](#))
 Thursday, May 14, 2009

A California nonprofit group whose mission is to provide affordable broadband Internet service to rural communities will meet today and Friday in Redding.

The California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) will gather at the Red Lion Hotel on Hilltop Drive.

While the meetings aren't intended for the public, the nonprofit's CEO, Sunne Wright McPeak, said she won't turn people away.

"Anybody who wants can come and participate, but we don't have the accommodations," McPeak said Wednesday.

McPeak's group was established and funded by the SBC-AT&T and Verizon-MCI merger agreements in 2005. The companies are contributing \$60 million over five years to help CETF achieve its goals.

CETF members include rural regional consortia. Expected in Redding are representatives from Chico State University and service provider firms like DigitalPath and Skybeam ISP.

Additionally, California Public Utilities Commissioner Rachelle Chong will be in Redding.

Today's meeting comes on the heels of a survey being conducted by the Center for Economic Development at Chico State University to gauge the need for high-speed Internet.

The phone surveys started this month. Businesses and households in Shasta, Siskiyou, Tehama, Butte, Lassen, Modoc and Plumas counties will be contacted .

McPeak said CETF has partnered with the McConnell Foundation in Redding to gauge demand for high-speed Internet in the seven counties. The foundation has chipped in \$250,000.

Survey results will be taken to private investors in an attempt to get broadband service to the areas.

With the help from the California Advance Services Fund, which provides grants to phone companies, and federal stimulus money, affordable broadband service is doable, McPeak said.

"There could be as much as a 90 percent subsidy for rural deployment," McPeak said. "That means the commitment you would need to bring broadband would only be 10 percent. ... That means they can charge (hookup) prices that are much lower."

While McPeak couldn't say how much rural high-speed service would be, she noted that survey results in Humboldt County and surrounding areas revealed people are willing to pay between \$20 and \$40 a month.

Reporter David Benda can be reached at 225-8219 or dbenda@redding.com.

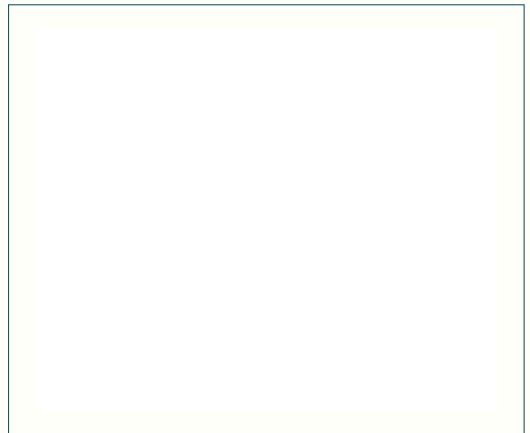
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