



broadband association of north dakota

BAND Together Newsletter

Executive Director Report: BAND Delivers a Unified Message in Washington

Every April, a small group of BAND members make a trip to Washington, D.C. It gives us the opportunity to tell our stories to the policymakers and agencies that help shape the work we do every day to keep North Dakotans connected.



Pictured: Wes Welch, Polar; Brett Stroh, BEK; Cassidy Hjelmstad, SRT; Brooks Goodall, RTC; Amber Meyer, Polar; Stacey Diehl, SRT; Tim Olson, Polar; Deven Mantz, SRT; Daniel Johnson, Polar; Tom Steinolfson, Red River

Not Pictured: Stanley Vangness, SRT; Carissa Swenson, BAND

This year, BAND members carried a clear and consistent message: reliable, sustainable

broadband service in rural North Dakota depends on both continued private investment and strong support from the Universal Service Fund. That partnership has been critical to keeping rural communities connected and ensuring North Dakota remains competitive in today's digital economy.

During our time in D.C., we met with North Dakota's congressional delegation and their staff to discuss the laws and policies that impact our industry. Much of the conversation focused on the future of the Universal Service Fund and the importance of modernizing the program so it remains predictable and sustainable for years to come.

BAND members shared real-world examples of how broadband networks support education, healthcare, agriculture, public safety, and economic development across our state. We also stressed that without the Universal Service Fund, rural consumers across North Dakota — and much of rural America — would likely face significant increases in the cost of connectivity services. Those impacts are important for policymakers to understand as they consider the future of the program.

We appreciate the time and thoughtful engagement we received from our congressional offices during our visit. These conversations matter, and we will continue working to provide stakeholders with accurate information and on-the-ground perspectives from the communities we serve.

At the end of the day, our message remains simple: reliable and affordable connectivity is essential in today's digital world. BAND and its members will continue advocating for policies that support the long-term connectivity needs of all North Dakotans.

BAND Member Spotlight: BEK

How BEK Communications Cooperative Is Delivering Fiber to North Dakota's Last 279 Locations

In the summer of 2004, a rural cooperative in central North Dakota made history. BEK Communications was recognized as one of the state's earliest pioneers of fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) service. A plaque — featuring the first foot of main and subscriber fiber from the West Linton Rural project — still hangs proudly in BEK's headquarters today.

More than two decades later, BEK is once again making history. This time, they are finishing in North Dakota what the state's independent local telecom coops and companies started over twenty years ago.

In early May 2026, North Dakota became one of the first states in the nation to execute all of its [BEAD subgrantee agreements](#). BEK is the primary recipient to deploy fiber-to-the-home to the state's final 279 unserved and underserved locations.

"BEK's willingness to take on these final locations shows the strength of our local cooperatives and the power of public-private partnership done right," said [Brian Newby](#), Broadband Program Director at the North Dakota Information Technology Department.



A Cooperative Built for the Long Haul

Founded in 1952 by residents of Burleigh, Emmons, and Kidder counties, BEK is a member-owned cooperative headquartered in Steele, with offices in Bismarck and Valley City. Today it serves a broad swath of central and eastern North Dakota — Burleigh, Emmons, Kidder, Morton, Oliver, McLean, Logan, McIntosh, Barnes, Griggs, Cass, Steele, and surrounding areas — delivering fiber-based internet, TV, and phone to approximately 13,000 member-owners.

Over the past 25 years, BEK has invested roughly \$250M in fiber infrastructure, covering about 12% of the state's geography. Like most North Dakota cooperatives, they moved aggressively to FTTH long before BEAD existed. The result: North Dakota only needed to spend about \$6M of its full \$130M BEAD allocation to close the final gaps.

"This isn't a massive greenfield build," explained [Derrick Bulawa](#), CEO of BEK Communications. "It's the finishing touch on a fiber network we've been building for a quarter century. We're simply extending our state-of-the-art high-capacity network into the remaining locations in the state."

From Testbed to 100% Fiber Availability

In the early 2000s, BEK served as a national testbed for one of the first rural FTTH deployments in the United States on some of the longest fiber loops in the country. Now, the same cooperative that helped prove rural fiber was possible is using BEAD funding to deliver it to the very last North Dakotans lacking fiber.

"It's incredibly fitting," said [Jesse Gunsch](#), BEK's COO. "We were there at the beginning when almost no one believed rural America could have fiber. Now every customer we serve — including these final ones — will have access to 10 Gig service. That's the standard we've set for our members. But, we have to protect these networks with skilled operational teams and sustainable funding mechanisms like the Universal Service Fund so rural America doesn't get left behind again."

Construction, permitting, staking, and environmental work are already underway, with full deployment targeted for completion by the end of 2027.

A Message for the Rest of the Country

As other states watch North Dakota's remarkable progress, BEK leaders have a clear message.

"Getting to this point took a tremendous amount of cooperation — with state officials, county governments, the Army Corps of Engineers, and others," **Bulawa** noted. "We're fortunate to have a broadband office in North Dakota that truly understands its mission and works to clear roadblocks instead of creating them. That partnership has been essential."

BAND congratulates BEK Communications on this historic milestone and thanks them for continuing to show what member-owned rural telecommunications can achieve.

For more information on BEK's service area or the BEAD project, visit bek.coop or [contact me directly](#).

Upcoming Events

July 7-8

BAND's Summer Meeting (Bismarck, ND)

Nov. 30-Dec. 2

BAND's Annual Meeting (Bismarck, ND)



Get in Touch & Stay Connected!

**Carissa Swenson,
Executive Director**

I am happy to provide information or speak at an event. If you aren't already subscribed to this newsletter, [please join our mailing list](#).



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