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USDA Rural Development: Telecommunications Program Success Story;

Community Connect Grant Program and Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP)—Oregon

Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs

Need:

Roughly ten years ago, the leadership of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs realized that their community severely lacked telecommunication services. Tribal leaders commissioned an assessment of the community's needs and formulated a strategic plan, which identified the present telecommunications services and the capabilities needed to upgrade services on the tribal land. The report identified Public Safety Radio, basic telephone service, and broadband Internet access as the most critical priorities. It also highlighted the fact that only 63% of tribal members had basic telephone service and that even fewer had broadband Internet access.

How Rural Development Helped:

The overwhelming task of bringing broadband Internet access and basic telephone service to the reservation was made easier when the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs discovered the USDA Rural Development Community Connect grant program. In 2002, the Tribes received a grant for \$695,832 to build a small fiber network on the reservation that now links together the Health and Wellness Center, the Community Counseling Center, the Head Start/pre-school building, many schools, and other tribal administration buildings. The grant also funded the creation of a technology center that allows tribal members to access the Internet 24 hours a day. Broadband Internet access has given rise to many new opportunities for tribal members, such as a café in the technology center, called the Tepee Deli.



Community Center built with Community Connect funds in Warm Springs

The Community Connect grant and the fiber network were just the beginning. With the help of their consultants, Converge Communications, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs applied for and received two additional Rural Development planning grants. The first, a USDA Rural Development Rural Business Opportunity Grant (RBOG), enabled them to look at options for improving basic telephone service. A portion of this grant paid for two staff members to visit five of the eight tribal telephone companies that exist in the US. These companies offered advice and insights gained from their own experiences with the visiting members. This information helped convince the tribal leadership to pursue the same path and take the first steps towards founding their own telecommunications company. The second, a USDA Rural Development Rural Business Enterprise Grant

(RBEG), helped fund the planning process involved with this undertaking.

Soon after, a new tribally incorporated company was created, called the Warm Springs Telecommunications Company (WSTC). A Board of Directors was selected, regulatory approvals obtained and an engineering team hired through a competitive process. As the WSTC was designing their network and exploring potential funding options, RUS announced the Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP) under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

In 2010, WSTC was selected for a \$5.4 Million award under BIP. These funds will be used to construct a hybrid fiber/wireless network throughout the reservation that will connect critical facilities, including the administrative buildings, schools, health care facilities, all police/fire and public safety radio towers, as well as Kah Nee Ta (the tribal resort). At the conclusion of this project, broadband service will be available to all residents, government agencies and businesses. Additionally, the WSTC was awarded a \$200,000 Technical Assistance grant in 2010, also under BIP, which will help to continue the planning process of building the new telecom network.

Results:

In addition to the 24-internet café constructed with the Community Connect funds, WSTC has started using BIP funding to bring internet to the rest of the reservation. As travel is difficult for many on the reservation, educational opportunities are limited. The new network will enable students to access school assignments and submit homework online from their homes. College students will be able to live on the reservation and conduct research or take distance learning courses without having to travel off the reservation.

Broadband Internet access will help reduce the chronic unemployment that faces the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Unemployment on the reservation presently stands at about 60%. In December 2011, the

new facility hired its seventh staff member. The new network continues to indirectly contribute to employment growth by allowing community members to pursue new, previously unavailable career opportunities, such as selling their artwork online or starting other online, home-based businesses.

Broadband Internet access will improve the health and welfare of tribal members. Due to the reservation's remote location, community members must currently travel great distances to reach the nearest major medical facility. New telemedicine applications which rely on broadband will allow for quick and easy consultations with medical professionals, e.g. tribal members will be able to meet with psychological specialists at Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland and diabetics will be able to connect to clinics in Bend for monitoring.

Finally, the new broadband network will support and improve the interoperable public safety radio network that has been upgraded with U.S. Department of Homeland Security grants. The network will link together the funded towers with the new radio equipment so that police and fire departments can better protect the people of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs as well as the citizens of Oregon who visit Kah Nee Tah, the Tribes' resort.

Thanks to USDA programs, the WSTC is ready to meet these challenges and is carrying all internet traffic for the tribes as of December 2011. As of February 2012, a new building has been constructed to house broadband facilities and three tribal members have been hired as the first full time employees, with advertisements for five more hires already placed in the community. WSTC also now has more than 400 customer phone lines connected via their fixed-wireless to the home network and every consumer has access to a free phone for emergencies

In October 2012, WSTC received the Oregon Connections Award for Excellence in Telecommunications from the State of Oregon.