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SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE
Testimony in Support of HB 2701 – Establishing the Broadband Expansion Task Force
March 9, 2018
Presented by: Alex Orel, Manager of Government Relations (913-602-0074)

Chair Lynn and members of the Senate Committee on Commerce, thank you for the opportunity to appear today on HB 2701, a bill establishing the statewide broadband expansion task force. I am Alex Orel, Manager of Government Relations for Kansas Electric Cooperatives, Inc. (KEC). KEC is a voluntary membership association that serves 28 not-for-profit distribution electric cooperatives and three generation and transmission electric cooperatives in Kansas.

Establishing a statewide broadband taskforce is an important step for the people of Kansas who are without access to high speed internet. Rural Kansans in particular are eager for access to broadband in order to improve their quality of life, bring in economic development opportunities, meet the needs of local business, and provide service for schools to expand educational opportunities.

Electric cooperatives in Kansas and across the nation have determined that our mission to enhance rural quality of life may now include broadband initiatives. One of our members, Butler Electric Cooperative, which is headquartered in El Dorado, recently announced a two-year plan to deploy broadband service in underserved areas of their territory.

In January, KEC held a panel during our annual meeting with representatives from the National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative, Nex-Tech (a Kansas-based broadband and technology company), and others to discuss such broadband opportunities. One of the conclusions of that panel was that partnerships should be developed with traditional suppliers where feasible -- and is one reason we believe the electric cooperatives should be members of the Broadband Expansion Task Force.

Electric cooperatives can also bring important economic and other resources to the broadband effort. For example, our membership operates close to 90,000 miles of poles and wires in rural Kansas and broadband expansion often engages pole attachment agreements between parties. There are unique issues with pole attachment and easement rights that would need to be considered – another reason it is appropriate and valuable to have the electric cooperative community represented on this task force.

Electric cooperatives were not originally included in the task force membership. KEC testified as a neutral conferee, initially, and requested inclusion. That adjustment was effectuated through a House floor amendment and the version before you today does include participation from our membership. As such we support HB 2701.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present testimony on HB 2701 and I would be willing to stand for questions at the appropriate time.

Kansas Electric Cooperatives, Inc., (KEC) serves 28 distribution electric cooperatives and three generation and transmission electric cooperatives, providing electricity to more than 200,000 Kansas households and spanning across approximately 80 percent of Kansas. For more information, visit www.kec.org.