Executive Summary

a. A statement of the problem or need

Dozens of New Mexico rural communities still lack broadband, and take rates for those with broadband are distressingly low. New Mexico, a minority-majority state, reflects national trends finding that only 33.8% of rural Hispanics use broadband at home compared to 40.1% of urban Hispanics. This is in stark contrast to the 65.7% broadband home use found in White, non-Hispanic residences. Rural Native Americans show an even greater gap with only 26.6% having home access (Digital Nation, NTIA Research Preview, February 2010). In New Mexico, factors affecting rural and minority populations are not something 'nice' to consider - they are critical. As a minority-majority state with 44.9% Hispanic and 9.7% Native American (Census Bureau), New Mexico must customize both opportunities and efforts to the people. This is true also of rural issues in a state covering over 1.2 million square miles with a total population of just over 1.9 million, 500,000 of whom live in Albuquerque, the state’s largest city. Broadband availability and effective usage are critical for the economic and social well-being of rural as well as urban communities. Broadband in the Back Country focuses on highly rural and frontier communities. No one preliminary target community has a population over 10,000 with most under 1,000, and the same is expected of additional communities to be recruited for the project. Project communities will be some of the newest recipients of broadband technology. In the case of the Navajo communities of Nageezi, Churchrock, and Rock Spring, broadband comes to some residents along with first-time-ever electricity and running water in their homes. Even in the more mainstream rural communities such as Pe’asco and Costilla, introduction of broadband can have significant economic and social benefits, but only if residents are provided with the awareness and skills needed to make best use of those resources. High poverty rates and low educational attainment plague the project communities. In the unique geographical and social environment of New Mexico, communities frequently suffer from a sense of isolation, in part because of topographical and distance barriers and in part because of complex social issues such as a desire to preserve cultural integrity. In a modern world, this isolation translates into poverty, poor educational attainment and limited healthcare.

b. Your overall approach and innovation

Broadband in the Back Country will build a culture of broadband usage through a multi-pronged process of community organization and resource delivery customized for each community. It will introduce community members to new tools that can grow businesses, help them live healthier lifestyles, and increase communication within their communities and the outside world. Broadband in the Back Country will nurture also one of the fastest growing economic sectors ‘home-based workers. Increase in broadband use will be particularly beneficial in tribal communities where broadband self-paced learning fits traditional tribal learning styles. Activities will include: 1) Identify communities with the need for services that have existing or pending broadband
resources; 2) Deliver training and services using a broad range of providers offering education, business development support, instruction for entrepreneurs, technology proficiency training, coordination with social services, healthcare and telemedicine awareness, etc.; and 3) Establish e-Community Broadband Teams made up of local elected officials, community organizations, educators, business leaders and seniors to build a plan for sustainable broadband adoption; and 4) Offer courtesy subscriptions for broadband service and free or reduced-cost computers for those in need. Innovative methods will include: 'The NMRDRC, in partnership with the New Mexico Economic Department's regional community development staff, will facilitate local e-Community Broadband teams. Teams will explore internet opportunities and select benchmarks measuring infrastructure, public access, and utilization of broadband as well as charting a course for the community's future. 'Partners providing instructional services for Broadband in the Back Country know how to navigate New Mexico's complex cultural waters. Instructional programs will be customized to diverse communities. The same will be the case for promotional efforts for Broadband in the Back Country. 'A newly formed non-profit corporation, the Community Economics Lab, brings a fresh new initiative focused on attracting 'location neutral' and home-based workers. As the age of the Creative Economy dawns, the quality of life and inspiring landscapes of rural communities become assets to attract these new professionals. Such businesses support not only the owners but also create new jobs as demands increase for local goods and services. c. Area(s) to be served; population of the target area(s), including demographic information and the estimated number of potential broadband subscribers your project will reach All communities served by this project are frontier or highly rural. All targeted communities have a population of fewer than 10,000 with many under 1,000. Hispanic: Communities to be served by this project run as high as 91% Hispanic (Pe'asco). Native American: Native American communities are represented on all service areas for the three telco partner organizations. Sacred Wind serves Navajo communities (98% Native American in targeted communities) and Kit Carson serves both Picuris and Taos Pueblos. Low Income: Poverty levels in communities selected for this project are part of the motivation for creating this project. In New Mexico 17% of the population lives below the poverty level and most communities targeted by Broadband in the Back Country are among the poorest in the state. Senior Citizens: Participation by the New Mexico Network of Area Agencies on Aging and Councils of Government assures service to seniors. Instruction will be provided through senior centers and care facilities. BROADBAND SUBSCRIBERS: Broadband in the Back Country anticipates over 10,000 new residential subscribers will be recruited and an anticipated 200 new business and institutional subscribers. d. Qualifications of the applicant that demonstrate the ability to implement the project The New Mexico Rural Development Response Council (NMRDRC) has provided exemplary rural development programs since 1992, when it was established as a result of the 1991 Presidential Initiative on Rural America. The organization has offered an unbroken continuum of service for 18 years, including current service to 60 frontier and rural communities. The RDRC's experience made it the ideal choice to serve as project lead agency and fiscal agent. NMRDRC has a well-developed system for administering federal and state grants. The organization is sophisticated in administering grants, including over a half million in federal grants during the past five years. This included $200,000 as a USDA RBEG and $200,000 as a Rural Community Development Initiative Grant. e. Jobs to be saved or created Broadband in the Back Country anticipates the creation of 20 direct job years for the project through staff and contractors hired specifically for the project. An additional 1,230 indirect job years are anticipated through business development, expansion of demand
for broadband providers, and increased need for jobs with improved economies. f. Overall cost of the proposed project Total project costs will be as follows: BTOP: $1,776,292.02 Match: $1,486,574.00 Total: $3,262,866.02