

For: LeClairRyan, Glen Allen, Va.
From: Parness & Associates, Aberdeen, N.J.

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**FORGET ABOUT COAL—BROADBAND IS THE BEST BET FOR RURAL AMERICA, WRITES
LECLAIRRYAN ATTORNEY**

*--Electric co-ops need more resources to help struggling rural areas bridge the broadband divide,
writes veteran energy attorney Roy M. Palk in column for Electric Light & Power.*

GLEN ALLEN, Va. (3/21/19) – Coal will never again be king, but electric co-ops actually *could* help revitalize struggling rural communities by rolling out high-speed Internet access, writes [LeClairRyan](#) attorney Roy M. Palk in a column for [elp.com](#), the website of Electric Light & Power and POWERGRID International.

In the March 12 piece, Palk, who is Senior Energy Industry Advisor for the national law firm and former CEO of the East Kentucky Power Cooperative, notes that more than 100 electric co-ops now aim to provide badly needed broadband to rural communities. “Lawmakers in states like Georgia and Mississippi are working to give co-ops explicit legal and regulatory permission to get into the broadband business,” he writes. “My home state of Tennessee (I grew up on a farm in Cookeville) took precisely such a step by passing the Tennessee Broadband Accessibility Act of 2017.”

Citing a report by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), Palk notes that 6.3 million households in electric co-op service areas lack broadband Internet access at an estimated cost of \$68 billion in economic value over the next 20 years. At a minimum, he writes, 30 percent of rural Americans have no access to broadband; 40 percent of all U.S. schools lack high-speed Internet (three-quarters of them in rural areas or small towns), and 60 percent of healthcare facilities outside of metro areas lack broadband.

However, the attorney notes, these numbers may underestimate the severity of the problem. Palk points to expert commentary indicating that FCC data has led to a wildly inaccurate map of broadband coverage. “ISPs provide the FCC with data on broadband access based on sweeping generalizations about entire census blocks of American households,” he writes.

In the column, Palk notes that infrastructure disparities between rural and urban areas are hardly unprecedented in American history. “Back in the 1920s, people in rural areas were still using candles and kerosene even though the average American city had already been electrified,” he writes. “Even as late as 1932 power lines ran to just 10 percent of the countryside.”

But with the help of 30-year government loans, electric cooperatives built the systems needed to light up rural America. Given this history and legacy, Palk writes, it would be poignant for them to do it again by bridging the broadband divide. “Some are already moving forward with plans to do so,” he notes.

While the recent introduction of \$950 million in federal incentives for rural broadband is a good start, Palk writes, NRECA has called for grants and loans of at least \$40 billion over 10 years.

Those electric utilities that have not yet explored their options with respect to rural broadband should consider doing so, the attorney advises. They could work with counsel to determine the legal, financial and regulatory issues in play; launch broadband subsidiaries; file applications for federal funds; and explore the logistics of working with expert third parties.

“By all accounts, rural America feels disconnected from the wired, populous and prosperous coasts,” the attorney concludes. “A major investment in rural broadband could literally and metaphorically reconnect these communities with the rest of the country.”

The full article is available at <https://bit.ly/2TGVQlc>

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