Connectivity Solutions: Helping Bridge Alabama’s Digital Divide
Executive Summary

The lack of broadband access throughout Alabama has caused a disparity in today’s connected world. The coronavirus pandemic has further illuminated the digital divide.

Without access to proper high-speed internet options, students can’t do schoolwork and attend classes, business owners can’t ensure continued operations and patients can’t conduct telehealth visits.

Closing the digital divide in Alabama is an important focus area for Alabama Power. While reliable electric service will always be our top priority, there is tremendous opportunity to build the future of our state’s economy through broadband solutions.

The power to bring electricity to Alabama started with water more than a century ago. By harnessing that resource, we began the electrification of the state and created growth. And the next transformational step – to lift up unserved and underserved areas – could happen by deploying assets needed to further drive growth.

We knew we had to do our part and identified an infrastructure solution to help facilitate broadband expansion. By using our strategic fiber deployments – a pre-planned initiative to create the smarter, more resilient electric grid – we created an out of the box solution to partner with telecommunications companies, providing any surplus capacity where needed and available to help extend their network reach to more customers.

Our grid has the middle mile resources needed to close the infrastructure gap through partnerships with telecommunications companies.

To make this vision a reality, we mobilized a dynamic public-private partnership initiative to create a shared vision of success. The Alabama Rural Broadband Coalition (ARBC) was formed in 2018 to connect Alabamians to each other and the rest of the world. The ARBC is a member-led organization representing more than 50 entities from health care, education, agriculture and economic development groups. The group was instrumental in passing transformational legislation during the Alabama legislative session in 2019. House Bill 400 (Broadband Using Electric Easement Accessibility Act) and Senate Bill 90 (Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund) paved the way to allow electric providers the ability to use their existing infrastructure and easements for high-speed internet, while also providing greater access to funding.

Since Gov. Kay Ivey signed these acts into law in May 2019, Alabama Power has forged partnerships with C Spire and Point Broadband to support their broadband offerings throughout our state.

Additionally, electric cooperatives have used the legislation to provide broadband in 26 counties in Alabama.

Our progress will ensure people in every region of our state have adequate high-speed internet. Building a better-connected Alabama will elevate our state to attract new businesses, create jobs and retain young professionals to help our communities thrive for the future.

We’re proud to continue to make great strides to bridge Alabama’s digital divide. The momentum continues with ongoing business development, additional partners, as well as a public affairs campaign to educate and engage key stakeholders on this issue’s importance.
The Situation
Alabama’s Broadband Disparity

The Solution
Fiber: The Key to the Future
Coalition Building

The Results
Legislative Successes
Partnering for Greater Impact

The Path Forward
Maintaining Momentum
Alabama’s Broadband Disparity

Alabama Power is committed to elevating Alabama, not only by providing safe and reliable service to the communities we serve, but also through finding ways to enhance our state’s future. Alabama’s broadband rankings and access to high-speed internet lagged behind much of the country. By collaborating across the company, creating public-private partnerships and promoting sound legislation, Alabama Power has driven meaningful gains in bridging our state’s digital divide.

By strategically using fiber deployments supporting our electric grid, we identified an opportunity to be an infrastructure solution to telecommunications companies, specifically in rural areas. Utility companies have existing telecommunications infrastructure, including spectrum and fiber, with surplus capacity available in some areas that can be used to serve customers in rural, suburban and urban areas alike.

Our fiber strategy makes our grid smarter, more reliable and resilient for our customers, while also providing an asset to help facilitate the expansion of broadband services to our service territory. Much like every corner of our state benefited from the expansion of electricity, connectivity can create the same opportunity and accelerate the foundation electricity built.

We understood that to enact transformational change we needed to work cross-functionally. At Alabama Power, more than 10 departments were engaged to help lay the proper groundwork and develop policies to facilitate this change. And externally, we built a 30-member strong coalition to help pass state legislation to bring more companies on board to connect Alabamians.

475k residents without broadband coverage (83% are rural)

57% of residents do not have access to an affordable (<$60/mo) plan

47th in Median Household Income

49th in Entrepreneurial Activity

50th in K-12 Education Performance

With ongoing advancements in technology, having a real-time, data processing communications network on the grid is crucial to its security and reliability. To better serve customers, we’re making substantial investments into the transmission and distribution fiber systems of our grid. These enhancements will make our grid smarter and more resilient, improving reliability and restoration times for customers.

Advanced technologies create a more segmented and automated electric grid, providing the ability to auto-restore and segment outages to reduce the number of customers affected and time without service. Fiber allows us to respond and restore power quicker than ever before. It’s the necessary conduit, combined with automated devices, that provides the best intel and data for optimal restoration. When and where surplus capacity is needed and available, we can utilize it to help build a better Alabama.

With each fiber deployment, Alabama Power has additional capacity along its transmission and distribution fiber networks, which are also known as middle mile resources. Alabama Power recognized an important role the company can play through these middle mile assets, by partnering with telecommunications providers to use this infrastructure as the backbone network for their own service builds.

A solution was found. The next step was to ensure we, along with other power providers in the state, were able to use our infrastructure for additional good.
Coalition Building

Working with important partner organizations representing Alabama’s wide range of businesses and industries, we were a founding member of the Alabama Rural Broadband Coalition (ARBC) in 2018. The mission of the coalition is simple: We believe every Alabama citizen should have access to broadband.

The ARBC recognized the important role broadband accessibility plays in positioning the state for economic development and educational opportunities. Diverse industries engaged in the coalition include agriculture, education, economic development and health care.

With the ARBC, we have more resources at the table and voices in the conversation. Together, we set a path forward and identified two factors needed for growth: more project funding and more entities able to use existing infrastructure to spur broadband expansion.

**ARBC Members**

**AGRICULTURE/CONSERVATION:**
- Alabama Poultry & Egg Association
- Alabama Cattlemen’s Association
- Alabama Agribusiness Council
- ALFA Farmers Federation

**BUSINESS:**
- C Spire
- Wiregrass Electric Cooperative
- Southeast Gas
- NFIB of Alabama
- Manufacture Alabama
- Energy Institute of Alabama
- Homebuilders Association of Alabama
- Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama
- Alabama Rural Electric Association of Cooperatives
- Alabama Bankers Association
- Alabama Association of Realtors

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:**
- Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Authority
- Coosa-Alabama River Improvement Association
- Alliance for Alabama Infrastructure
- Economic Development Association of Alabama

**EDUCATION:**
- The University of Alabama System
- School Superintendents of Alabama
- Council for Leaders in Alabama Schools
- Auburn University
- Alabama Association of School Boards
- Alabama Education Association
- Alabama Community College System

**HEALTH CARE:**
- Disabilities Leadership Coalition of Alabama
- Alabama Rural Health Association
- Alabama Hospital Association
These needs led to the creation of cutting-edge policy solutions in the Alabama Legislature during the 2019 Session. House Bill 400 and Senate Bill 90 were created to encourage the expansion of access to broadband in rural and underserved areas of the state. The ARBC worked tirelessly to mobilize with key stakeholders and legislators to garner bipartisan support for the legislative package.

The ARBC was able to form a united front to advocate, and its efforts were instrumental in securing the passage of both pieces of transformational legislation. In May 2019, Gov. Kay Ivey signed both acts into law, paving the way for a better-connected Alabama.

**House Bill 400**

Broadband Using Electric Easement Accessibility Act: sponsored by Rep. Randall Shedd – Created the opportunity for electric providers, like Alabama Power and our co-op partners throughout the state, to use our easements to operate and provide broadband services. The bill passed with only two nay votes.

**Senate Bill 90**

Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund: sponsored by Rep. Clay Scofield – Amended the act to expand the types of projects that could be funded and the areas in which grant funds can be offered to incentivize deployment of broadband service across the state. This act passed unanimously and ensures additional grant money will reach more Alabamians to improve network speed. Funds are now available for projects in unserved areas or for middle mile projects that connect to projects in unserved areas. Funds are also available for projects serving critical stakeholders, such as hospitals and first responders, in underserved areas or in rural areas that have a need for the increased speed that broadband provides.
Within six months of Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey signing the broadband legislation, Alabama Power announced its first strategic partnership in November 2019 with telecommunications company C Spire to support its broadband offering. C Spire, located in Jackson, Mississippi, established an innovative partnership with Alabama Power to serve residents in the Jasper area, northwest of Birmingham. Central to the partnership, C Spire contracts for Alabama Power’s surplus fiber infrastructure to serve as a backbone for its service offering.

Following the completion of Alabama Power’s fiber deployments in Jasper, C Spire began serving its first customers in the area in November 2020. Since the initial partnership, Alabama Power continues to expand its reach with C Spire, adding more communities statewide.

In January 2021, Alabama Power announced a new partnership with Georgia-based Point Broadband to support its service offering to businesses and residents near Lake Martin, located in east-central Alabama.
Maintaining Momentum

We’ve achieved great strides, but our work continues until all four corners of Alabama are connected.

Tactics include strategic, ongoing education and engagement of the state Legislature and general public on steps needed to bridge Alabama’s digital divide.

Inform

Educate

Grow
THE PATH FORWARD

Maintaining Momentum | Advocacy Toolkit

ARBC Website

Join the coalition.
Transform rural Alabama's future.

AGRICULTURE/FOOD
- United States Department of Agriculture
- Alabama Farm Bureau
- Alabama Soybean Association
- Alabama Farmers Federation

ENERGY
- Alabama Public Service Commission
- Alabama Power Company
- Duke Energy Alabama

EDUCATION
- Alabama Education Association
- Alabama State Department of Education

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
- Alabama Economic Development Partnership
- Alabama Commerce Department

HUMAN SERVICES
- Alabama Department of Economic Security
- Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education

TOURISM
- Alabama Department of Tourism
- Alabama Travel Association
- Alabama Tourism Industry Association

JOIN TODAY

Tell your state legislators to bring fast and reliable internet to your area.

Expand Rural Broadband in Alabama

Create a better future for rural Alabama.
Open the doors to internet-for-all.

Everyone in Alabama deserves fast and reliable internet.
And our appetite is only growing exponentially in this age.

Join the Coalition.

Full name:
Full membership code:
Email Address:
Join today.
More than 900 citizens have taken the campaign’s action to ask their legislators to support better broadband policy and funding. Almost every member of the legislature has been reached.
Alabama Broadband Accessibility Act

HOW IT BEGAN
Governor Kay Ivey signed the Alabama Broadband Accessibility Act into law on March 28, 2018. This act established the Alabama Broadband Accessibility Fund to help expand high-speed broadband services in unserved rural parts of the state for the betterment of:
- Economic Development
- Education
- Healthcare
- Agriculture
- Emergency Services

Amendments to the original Act were signed into law on May 30, 2019 that changed the definition of an “unserved area”, increased the percentage of the project cost that can be covered by the Fund (from 20% to 35%) and broadened the permitted use of other federal and state support.

SINCE THE BEGINNING
Just shy of $20 million over the last 3 years has been distributed through the Fund to secure broadband connection to over 25,000 households, businesses and community anchors (schools, libraries, medical and health care providers, higher education, government entities, etc.). Because of the changes enacted by Senate Bill 90 in 2019, the availability of the Fund was dramatically increased for providers. See the insert for a full detailed list of the grant recipients.

DISTRIBUTING CLOSE TO $20M TO SECURE BROADBAND FOR 25,000 HOUSEHOLDS AND COMMUNITY ANCHORS

KEY POINTS
- DEFINITION OF AN UNSERVED AREA
  Areas that currently receive < 25mbps of download speed and < 3mbps of upload speed. See the insert for the most recent coverage map provided by ADECA.
- DISTRIBUTION
  Funds are appropriated by the legislature into the Broadband Accessibility Fund which is administered by ADECA and granted through an application process.

Broadband Using Electric Easement Accessibility Act

Broadband Over Easements was established when Governor Kay signed House Bill 400 into law on May 30, 2019. This bill, sponsored by Majority Leader Ledbetter and Chairman Randall Shedd, greatly expands the availability of providing high-speed broadband to rural parts of Alabama.

WHAT IT DOES
Allows electricity providers to use, or contract with others to use, existing or future easements, for broadband purposes.

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT
Significantly accelerates the expansion of broadband by using electric companies’ existing easements and infrastructure to provide increased coverage to underserved areas that are not densely populated enough for larger telecommunications companies to serve.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS
- Six electric cooperatives are currently using or plan to use the act to further enhance broadband solutions in their area. To date, these efforts have provided broadband to rural areas of Autauga, Crenshaw, Dallas, and Lowndes counties with many others in the works. An additional electric coop has partnered with a private company to provide coverage to parts of Covington, Coosa, Crenshaw, Monroe, Geneva, Pike, Crenshaw, Dallas, and Lowndes counties.
- Lake Martin
  Point Broadband announced plans to offer fiber-to-the-premises network and fiber-fed fixed wireless service to select areas on Lake Martin. This service will provide up to 1 gigabit symmetrical broadband service with whole-home Wi-Fi which will allow numerous broadband access to run efficiently.
- Jasper
  The first residents in the state are now connected to C Spire’s ultrafast, fiber-based GigaBlast broadband internet.

SIMILAR PROJECTS WITH C-SPIRE ARE CURRENTLY EXPECTED FOR:
- Parts of Tensas within the first quarter of 2021
- portions of Mobile County

Creative Assets and Engagement

Equity in Broadband Deployment Webinar

Register Now!
THE PATH FORWARD

Maintaining Momentum | Advocacy Toolkit

Social Media

Alabama Power
January 6

Broadband access is important for Alabamians. Today Point Broadband LLC announced a new initiative to offer high-speed fiber internet for areas on Lake Martin, and we’re proud to be their partner. Learn more. https://bit.ly/3bev8ll

Point Broadband to offer high-speed fiber internet on Alabama’s Lake Martin - Alabama NewsCenter

Alabama Power
December 11, 2019

We were excited to join with state and local officials for C Spire’s announcement to expand broadband services in the Birmingham metro area and other parts of Alabama. Tap link in bio to learn more!

C Spire announces major expansion of broadband internet in Birmingham - Alabama NewsCenter

Alabama Power
November 22, 2019

We were excited to join our Alabama Rural Broadband Coalition partners Thursday to welcome a new member and announce rural broadband expansion beginning in 2020. Learn more! http://bit.ly/Zq8M5Zl

Alabama Rural Broadband Coalition, C Spire announce expansion in Jasper - Alabama NewsCenter

Sen. Clay Scofield
(AAConservative)

The #Covid19 pandemic has made clear how high-speed broadband access is a basic personal necessity for all Alabamians. From virtual learning to telemedicine visits, reliable internet is an essential part of our daily lives.
THE PATH FORWARD

Maintaining Momentum | Advocacy Toolkit

Shaping the Media Landscape

Governor signs bills to boost broadband access in rural Alabama

Bill allowing electric utilities to offer high-speed internet to rural areas passes

Parts of Trussville, Jasper to be first in Alabama with access to C Spire’s fiber broadband services

Faster internet speeds on the way to the Jasper area

New partnerships bringing ultra-fast internet to Alabama

Construction planned in Jasper, Trussville to provide better broadband

WATCH: C Spire announces ultra-fast fiber broadband in 2 Alabama markets

Point Broadband announces plans to offer fiber-to-the-premises high-speed Internet for select areas on Lake Martin

Expanded broadband access is the Alabama Rural Broadband Coalition’s mission

Fiber project moving forward

Guest notebook: Digital divide is real in Alabama