



Jefferson County Cooperative Extension Office

275 North Mulberry Street

Monticello, FL 32344

MEMORANDUM

May 4, 1999

To: Dr. Mike Martin, Vice President for Agriculture and Natural Resources

Dr. Chris Waddill, Dean for Extension

From: Larry Halsey, Member of IT-PAC and Jefferson County Extension Director

Concerning: Discounted Telecommunications Service for Extension Offices

Connectivity of IFAS installations, especially Extension offices, was identified as one of the highest priorities in the IFAS InfoStructure Task Force report. It is probably the most difficult recommendation and one of the most costly technologies to implement. We recognize and appreciate the commitment both of you have made to achieve connectedness, in spite of severe budget constraints. The Information Technologies Policy Advisory Committee continues to discuss implementation options and strategies. On April 18, we briefly discussed the possibility of securing the AE-Rate@ as one option. It cannot be accomplished at the IFAS, the UF, nor the Florida level, but would require a change in federal law or US Department of Education policy. The committee suggested that I pose the subject to you.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 which established the Universal Service Program offers access through deep discounts of up to 90% of commercial rates to public schools and libraries. The E-Rate requires discounted telecommunications service through a federal program under USDOE. It specifically prohibits institutions of higher education from benefitting from the discounts. Universities were prohibited because of their historic access to the Internet Abackbone@ and their more advantageous funding. The legislative intent was to make Internet connectivity accessible to students in rural and low-income counties where markets are limited. Later, rural health care services were added to the targeted programs. The funding formula is biased toward rural, remote and poor communities. E-Rates apply to T-1, 56K and ISDN lines, and other modes of Internet connectivity.

In Florida, availability of E-Rate would help us implement our goal of high-speed, broad band width, reliable access to network services and information on behalf of our county clients and in support of our county programs of work. Though Extension is part of Ahigher education,@ its funding is more typical of local communities. Telecommunications costs for Extension offices are embedded in county government, not state higher education, budgets. In brief, expanding the scope of E-Rate to include county Extension units would be a boon to local users of Extension programs in Florida and nation

wide.

Our IFAS IT negotiations with FDOE-FIRN have identified a wide disparity in access rates for 56K telecommunication lines, from as low as \$80 per month for coastal urban counties such as Pinellas and Hillsborough to over \$250 for rural counties such as Lafayette, Franklin, Gulf, Liberty, Suwannee and Hamilton. The extreme of known rates is \$347 per month. Many local telephone service providers for interior, rural counties (including Jefferson County) have not offered a quote to FIRN. The irony of the smallest, most distant and disadvantaged counties with the least ability to pay market telecommunication rates facing the highest absolute rates, not to mention per capita rates, for Internet access is precisely the access inequity E-Rate addresses.

Attached are descriptions of the Universal Service Program/E-Rate from web sites. UF/IFAS should explore the possibility of acting as ineligible consortia member, mentioned in the information enclosed, as a short-term step in reducing costs to IFAS and to counties. However, the savings may be negligible or nil. In the longer run, UF/IFAS needs to explore whether we qualify under USDOE policy or can achieve an expansion of statute to be eligible for the program. Congressional revision or amendment of the Telecommunications Act probably will be required. That, in turn, will necessitate concerted effort by many states= Land Grant institutions and their Extension Services to have a chance of success. We may need to offer leadership in a multi-state, regional or national effort.

If LGUs seek to include Extension in E-Rate, we must emphasize the educational function, including youth development, at the local level and the rural/urban and income dichotomies, that were the early justifications for the Act. Emphasis must be given to user access benefits and information delivery effectiveness rather than institutional efficiencies such as cost savings and internal communications. UF/IFAS, particularly Extension, may take several steps:

1. Champion the cause of expanding E-Rate institutional coverage to include county Extension offices with the two national leadership groups, NASULGC and ECOP.
2. Establish a dialog with Schools and Libraries Corporation and with USDOE to impress on them that the expansion is consistent with the educational intent of the statute.
3. Suggest to UF administration this may be a good project for UF=s new lobbyist.
4. Call on members of Florida=s legislative delegation to support the proposal. Among them, Rep. F. Allen Boyd represents one of the poorest and lowest population densities in the eastern US, with 10 counties who stand to benefit from the E-Rate.
5. Recruit the support of politically effective potential beneficiaries/client users such as Farm Bureau and others to support the anticipated need for legislative action.
6. Enlist professional associations of Extension educators to support a collaboration seeking eligibility for E-Rate.

As a member of the National Association of County Agricultural Agents (NACAA) and Epsilon Sigma Phi (ESP) through our state affiliate organizations, I am willing to initiate a discussion with them.

Thank you for your attention, and for your energetic efforts to find a way to make better connections for county Extension offices as partners in the electronic information distribution that is so critical for our mission.

Enclosures:

<http://www.ed.gov/Technology/comm-mit.html>

http://www.sl.universalservice.org/Reference/FAQ/Basic_Q_A.asp

<http://www.ed.gov/Technology/erateforms/> (.pdf version)

cc: Members, IT-PAC, Joe Joyce, Fedro Zazueta, Tom Hintz, Lawrence Heitmeyer (FACAA), Albert Fuller (ESP)