



For immediate release:

8/4/2021

Alaska Tribal Spectrum announces plans to bring affordable broadband to all of rural Alaska via the Alaska Tribal Network

It is estimated that there are 60,000 unserved households in Alaska with no access to broadband. Another estimated 120,000 have slow internet access that can cost hundreds of dollars per month. These Tribal areas also have poor cell phone service and lack data access. For most of us, we can't imagine a day without the Internet or our cell phone. For these Alaskans, it is a constant reality. It's an impediment to social and economic growth. It's also a public safety issue.

Emmett Fitch, CEO of OptimERA, who is passionate about his motivation to bring quality communications to rural Alaska summed it up as follows: *"We have to work together. In February 2020, 18-year-old Alexis Magalong died from exposure near Summer Bay, Alaska because the phone in her hand, in direct sight of 3 different cell towers, wouldn't connect. We have to stop working against each other and work together to overcome the communication problems plaguing this state and this country. We need it, our kids need it, and our country needs it. If we all join together to create a new type of network, a Tribal network, we can fix our problems together.... it's the idea of tribalism at its core."*

In many rural Alaska Tribal villages, the best internet is at the school or health clinic. Many rely on old slow-style satellite connections that are highly subsidized. As a result, everyone else with no subsidy has expensive rates. Cell phone service in these communities is unreliable. Because conditions in Alaska make extending fiber so expensive, fiber isn't arriving any time soon in these rural areas. Rural Alaska needs help now, so current generations can get relief.

Here is what having reliable affordable Internet would mean, as related recently by an 11th grade student from Chignik Lagoon: *"Having new, high-speed internet would do so much for the village. For instance, people will be able to do their banking and bills without frustration, kids would be able to do their homework at home, and they will be able to attend meetings and classes through Zoom without constant disconnection."*

Unfortunately, these capabilities are not currently available in hundreds of communities in rural Alaska.

Last year, the FCC offered a key ingredient to solving this problem: 2.5 GHz radio spectrum. This is ideal to create last mile wireless delivery, and the FCC offered it for free to every Alaskan Tribe—all they had to do was apply for it. Alaska Tribal Spectrum (ATS) was funded by the Denali Commission to help every Tribe in Alaska to reserve their 2.5 GHz spectrum before it was too late. Because ATS made it a simple process, ATS is about to be awarded 2.5 GHz spectrum for 85 Tribal member communities. Since that time, the ATS membership has grown to over 100 communities as other Tribes are adding their collective spectrum footprints to create one large statewide Alaska Tribal Network (ATN).

ATS chose OptimERA to provide ATN management because they have built a successful network that serves nearly 10,000 people with fixed wireless, dedicated internet, and LTE service in Unalaska. Their passion and approach to technology, along with their expertise in the harsh Alaskan environment, makes them a perfect choice to manage the ATN and other technology partners.

The ATN design is a standards-based future-proof Open RAN 4G/5G design able to provide broadband and full LTE mobility with roaming. Mobile carriers will be able to leverage the network with competitive roaming rates—putting that revenue into the hands of the local Tribes that own and control the network. Every Tribe can choose to build and operate their network, select who builds and operates it, or let the ATS manage it for them. Everything is in Tribal control, including ATS member control of the network policies of the ATN.

To address the middle mile challenge, ATS will be applying for an NTIA grant subsidy to purchase capacity on advanced satellite systems dedicated to serving rural Alaska. This bulk buy will immediately create affordable broadband everywhere in rural Alaska in every ATN community. ATS is inviting every Tribe in Alaska to join in its application.

The ATN will use 2.5 GHz Tribal spectrum to wirelessly transmit any internet connection to homes and phones. It also can be used to deliver high quality cell phone service on the same network. But the network needs to be connected to something that can deliver affordable broadband, otherwise there is no advantage. Just distributing the same old expensive internet is not a complete solution.

In order to address this critical need for an affordable middle mile, ATS will be submitting—with its large Tribal membership—an NTIA application for funding to purchase wholesale capacity on advanced satellite systems dedicated to serving rural Alaska. This will be used to create affordable broadband service in every rural ATN community in Alaska. ATS is inviting every unserved Tribe in Alaska to join in its application.

Native born Dennis Robinson, who serves as the Chairman of the ATS Policy Board and has lived in rural Alaska all of his life, puts it like this: *“Rural Alaska has a middle mile problem. Everyone wants to install a wireless network, but unless there is fiber or another inexpensive connection, what good is it? The only way to get affordable access to everyone is by working together so we can fund our own Tribally controlled GEO, MEO, or LEO satellite access. Buying in bulk brings the price low enough so everyone can afford it in rural Alaska. The only way to do it is for all Tribes to apply together for funding large enough to help all of us.”*

A solution that invites everyone to participate

ATS is inviting all Tribes to join and support the grant application to the NTIA to bring affordable broadband to every village—allowing them to deploy their Tribal spectrum and generate revenue from this valuable resource. ATS is also inviting every service provider in Alaska to participate on the ATN, reducing their operational cost and enabling delivery of lower-cost higher-quality service through purchasing wholesale access on the network in the markets they select.

Time is short

Because applications are due to the NTIA on September 1, ATS—thanks to the Denali Commission—is again streamlining the process and providing a simple way for the Tribes to benefit. Any Tribe can join the application at www.aktribalspectrum.org/support-ntia. ATS will design the network and add each member to the application.

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