



Last Thursday, representatives from the USDA, Pima County, Congressman Raul Grijalva's office, and Table Top Telephone Company gathered at the Sonoran Desert Inn & Conference Center to announce a \$13.2 million loan awarded to Table Top. From the left are USDA Rural Utility Service Administrator Andrew Berke, USDA Arizona State Director for Rural Development Charlene Fernandez, district director Ruben Reyes from the office of Congressman Grijalva, Pima County Supervisor Dr. Sylvia Lee, and Table Top Telephone General Manager Greg Andreas.

Table Top fiber internet will soon extend to Ajo

Executives from Table Top Telephone Company, USDA representatives, Pima County officials, and Ajo area residents gathered at the Sonoran Desert Inn & Conference Center last Thursday to have a round table discussion about a \$13.2 million infrastructure loan recently awarded by the USDA Rural Utilities Service ReConnect program to Table Top.

Andrew Berke, USDA RUS Administrator, addressed those gathered and mirrored what Table Top wrote in their October 31 press release: "Table Top Telephone is working on closing the digital divide for our rural communities... [by] bringing faster internet and new opportunities to the communities we serve. These projects are designed to ensure that unserved and underserved locations have access to reliable, high-speed internet."

Berke also spoke about digital equity and said that investing in connecting rural communities to the internet allows people in underserved areas to have more equal footing with those in urban areas. "Great things can happen," he said, noting that Table Top has been successful in applying for ReConnect funds for other rural communities they serve.

The loan will enable Table Top to "facilitate 38 miles of fiber internet planned to [connect] 1,800 homes" according to their press release. The company has teamed up with Ajo Improvement Company and APS to ensure the needed pole attachments are in place. "Supplies are stocked and ready, so as soon as preliminary work is complete" they will be installing the fiber to "connect to as many homes as possible."

When Pima County Supervisor Sylvia Lee asked about the timeline for completing the project, a Table Top representative responded that they are hoping to

begin construction in the next few months and that the project will be completed in phases, with an estimated one to two years of work before it is completed. The installation is for "aerial fiber" which means pole-to-pole between Gila Bend and Ajo.

Aaron Cooper of ISDA asked Berke if provisions were in the loan to make internet plans affordable once the fiber installation is completed. Berke replied that regulation of plan affordability differs in each state but that what he has generally seen is that the USDA funding covers the expense of installing the fiber so that the partnering internet service providers don't have to pass that expense on to their customers.

Cesar Cardenas from Desert Senita inquired whether Table Top planned to provide adequate staffing for the Ajo area once the fiber installation is completed. Greg Andreas of Table Top responded that staff would be provided as needed and that a system moving from copper to fiber typically brings trouble tickets down.

Lt. Jeremy Olsen of the Pima County Sheriff's Department asked if there is a redundancy plan in place for future power outages since the project will be using existing power poles. By way of example, he mentioned an outage in early September when all digital telecommunications, including 911 calls, were disrupted for about

an hour. Table Top personnel responded that redundancy will be accounted for with the new project.

Finally, *Ajo Copper News* staff asked Andreas if in the future other entities would be able to utilize the fiber system by leasing space in the cable. He replied that there was such potential in the future but that it's "not necessarily within their business plan."



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