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Plaskett Introduces Bill Aimed at Helping Rural Port Communities Get Federal Funding for Broadband Internet

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The WICO dock in St. Thomas in 2015. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett has announced bipartisan legislation aimed at increasing internet service in rural coastal communities nationwide.

Ms. Plaskett, a member of the House Agriculture Committee, sponsored the legislation — Small Ports Act (H.R.4329) — along with Congressman Jerry L. Carl (R-AL).

According to the release, in rural coastal areas people congregate near inland and small ports. These harbors act as hubs for commerce and tourism. This bill recognizes the importance of small ports to their rural economies. It will help small ports nationwide get federal grants and loans and improve their broadband coverage, thereby enabling working-waterfronts to order inventory and coordinate deliveries, access real-time weather updates and grow economically, stated the release.

“Broadband loan and grant applications submitted to the Department of Agriculture’s Rural Utility Service are assigned different levels of priority before they are awarded. This bill recognizes the importance of small ports and elevates the priority of applications seeking to boost internet capacity,” stated Ms. Plaskett. “This bill states that broadband grant and loan applications from small ports will be raised to be considered equal in priority to applications that are developed with the participation of a non-profit or philanthropic organization. Small ports often support communities in rural America. Broadband internet is very important to small ports as it can improve commerce and safety. Broadband internet is equally valuable for coastal fishing communities and inland barge grain-shipments. Additionally, Army Corps dredging activities can use local broadband to operate with more precision and efficiency.”

“Alabama is blessed with an abundance of navigable waters for recreation and commerce. Rural ports are found along those waters and are the hubs of economic activity for their communities, so it’s critical those ports have access to broadband to further expand their operations, provide jobs, and improve public safety,” said Mr. Carl. “I’m proud to work with Congresswoman Plaskett to introduce bipartisan legislation to help small ports across Alabama and the nation access federal loans and grants to improve their broadband capabilities.”

Senator Ron Wyden has introduced the companion bill in the U.S. Senate (S.1908), according to the release. The bill intends to help small ports nationwide by raising their priority for federal grants and loans that would improve their broadband coverage, helping them to grow economically and ensuring they have real-time access to weather updates.