

Yurok Tribe will expand, improve broadband

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A \$2.1 million project to significantly boost transmission speeds and provide service to families who have never had internet access was announced recently by the Yurok Tribal Council.

The project, funded by the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act is expected to be completed before the end of this year. It will greatly expand Yurok Connect, a tribe-owned wireless internet service provider.

“The Broadband Project will considerably enhance emergency communications on the reservation for decades to come,” said Joseph L. James, the chairman of the Yurok Tribe. “It will also create a wide range of additional benefits for tribal citizens, ranging from new economic opportunities to improved healthcare options. This is game changer for the Yurok Tribe.”

Jessica Engle, director of the tribe's information technology department, agreed.

“Yurok Connect customers and tribal government offices can expect to experience a night-and-day difference in the speed of our internet services,” she said. “This project is going to produce many positive outcomes,

such as greater access to distance-learning platforms and virtual job opportunities, not to mention all of the other benefits associated with a fast internet service.”

In addition, the broadband project will facilitate meaningful progress in several key areas, including education, e-commerce, telehealth, natural disaster response and public safety.

After the project is complete, Yurok Connect will offer 1 gigabit per second service, which is several times faster than what is currently offered. Students on the reservation will be able to participate in online learning because the high-speed service offers sufficient bandwidth to sustain online teaching platforms. Yurok Connect customers will be able to quickly communicate with their primary care physicians and other types of healthcare providers. For the first time, Yurok artists and traditional tradespeople will be able to sell their professional-quality products to patrons all over the world.

The Yurok Reservation, located in far Northern California, is in one of the most technologically disadvantaged parts of the state. Since its inception, Yurok Connect has secured several grants to gradually expand its coverage on the reservation, where the steep, forested terrain makes it particularly challenging and expensive to install broadband equipment.

Prior to receiving the CARES dollars, the IT Department developed a detailed plan for the Yurok Connect Broadband Project and acquired a grant to implement a portion of the now fully-funded project. The department also obtained funding to hire EnerTribe, a Native American-owned firm, to engineer and construct the electronic infrastructure. EnerTribe is currently re-engineering and building up the Yurok tower sites to accommodate better broadband speeds. The towers will also be equipped with cutting-edge, superior quality hardware to support fast internet velocities.

“We are thrilled to be working with our big brother and sister tribes at such a critical time. The pandemic has impacted Indigenous communities globally in such a devastating way and if broadband can help make it just a little easier for our tribal governments to operate, we are grateful to contribute,” said EnerTribe CEO Forest James.

The tribe is working to strengthen emergency communications in other ways. Many of the family homes outside of the current internet coverage area also do not have telephone services. The Yurok IT Department secured two grants to get the existing broadband towers cellular ready and to begin a search for commercial carriers to take advantage of this opportunity, which will vastly expand cellphone reception on the reservation. The department and EnerTribe are actively looking for a cellular provider to offer this much-needed service. This project is expected to be completed sometime next year.

“The combination of the CARES Act funding and smart planning has accelerated our efforts to build a brighter future for the Yurok people,” Chairman James said. “I would like to commend the Tribal Council, the IT Department, EnerTribe and THPO for laying the groundwork to make these long-term reservation infrastructure improvements a reality.”

Earlier this year, the California Public Utilities Commission funded the Klamath River Rural Broadband Initiative, which seeks to install fiber-optic cable from Orleans to Orick as well as from Weitchpec to Wautech on the Yurok Reservation. This project is currently in the permitting phase and will complement the Yurok Connect Broadband Project.

The construction of the new internet infrastructure received funding from CARES Act and the three separate organizations, including the Tribal Nations Grant Fund, U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration and the California Public Utilities Commission.

Launched in 2013, Yurok Connect offers inexpensive broadband internet to individuals, Tribal offices as well as Tribally owned and private businesses. The Yurok IT Department built the whole, wireless internet system from the ground up. The wireless internet service provider is a self-sustaining business administered entirely by Yurok citizens.