

TRANSCRIPT

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of
**Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman Discussing President Bush's State Of The Union
Address And Announcing New Programs For Expansion Of Rural Telecommunications
Technology With Under Secretary For Rural Development Tom Dorr And Rural Utilities
Service Administrator Hilda Legg
January 29, 2003 - Washington, D.C.**

MS. LEGG: Good morning. I'm Hilda Legg, the Administrator for Rural Utilities Services at USDA. Thank you so much for joining us today. Secretary of Agriculture, Ann Veneman and Under Secretary Tom Dorr are here today to announce a very exciting new program. We are utilizing different mediums of technology for today's announcement. Through this video conference, we will give you a small taste of what this high-speed telecommunications technology can mean in building a stronger America. First, through our interactive connectivity to remote sites, and then through the webcasting of the event, which allows anyone with Internet connectivity to hear and see us. We will introduce you to some of our partners in rural America.

In addition, we are going to see shining examples of USDA's investment in infrastructure through broadband technology. And we're going to give you these examples, through our distance learning and telemedicine applications--those that require that high-speed capacity, and how this capability can improve and really even lengthen the lives of rural Americans.

As a part of the President's administration it is my extreme pleasure to be joined today by two really true visionaries for economic development and investment in rural America.

Secretary Ann M. Veneman was unanimously confirmed by the United States Senate and sworn in as the 27th United States Secretary of Agriculture on January 20, 2001. As a lawyer and a daughter of a peach farmer, Secretary Veneman brings a unique set of credentials to her position. She has served as California's Agriculture Secretary and the Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. She first joined the USDA in the Foreign Agriculture Service. Raised in Modesto, California, Secretary Veneman brings an exciting mix of deep roots in rural America and a vast knowledge and vision of the future of this nation.
Secretary Veneman.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: "Well, thank you very much, Hilda. It is a great pleasure to be here today and to join all of you who are out in the various remote sites with us today. We really appreciate your participation and we're looking forward very much to this very exciting event. And I want to thank Under Secretary Dorr. Tom Dorr, as Hilda says, brought tremendous vision to this position, and we truly appreciate the leadership which he has shown in the whole area of rural development and looking at how we can best address our rural communities.

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“One of the issues, of course, is to make sure that our rural communities have access to the kinds of technology that we have in other parts of the country and in other parts of the world, so that rural America will not be left behind.

“Just last night, we heard the President's State of the Union Address. We heard him talk about four specific domestic policy goals that he has for America for the coming year. And I want to quickly go through some of those, because they are important not only to the country as a whole, but have particular applicability to rural communities. First of all, he talked about strengthening our economy by creating more jobs. And I'd just like to say that if we're going to create more jobs in rural America, we need the technology that will attract the businesses that will create the kinds of jobs we need.

“His second goal is providing high-quality, affordable health care for all Americans and prescription drugs for seniors. And we're going to talk today about how technology is helping us get health care to rural America.

“He then talked about as the third goal creating energy independence while improving the environment. And we have both the issue of energy and the opportunities for agriculture, as well as agriculture being the best stewards of land, and our opportunity to contribute so much to the environmental well-being of this country.

“And finally he talked about applying the compassion of America to the deepest problems in America. Those are issues that affect all of us in urban and rural communities alike. But these are all key priorities for rural America, as well as all of America. Providing tax relief helps every American and puts more money into the hands of farmers and rural communities, and will create new jobs and investments throughout the country.

“Access to affordable health care is a particular challenge to the residents of rural America. And agriculture, as I said, is a big part of the energy solution. And that's why Congress needs to pass the energy bill that the President proposed last year. The President's also talking a lot about the environment.

“As you know, this most recent farm bill put a tremendous amount of new investment into environmental programs for working farmlands. We think that's good news for the environment and for our farmers and ranchers. And we're working hard to implement these provisions.

“And the President referenced last night the need for the Congress to pass the Healthy Forests initiative to help prevent the devastating fires that have impacted so many of our rural communities around the country.

“So, these are all important priorities for the administration and they're important for rural America as we go forward throughout the next few years and look to the future of rural America and economic development.

“So I'm very pleased today that I'm here with our Under Secretary Tom Dorr and with Hilda Legg in announcing what USDA is doing to expand our efforts to bring farmers, rural residents, rural businesses greater access to improved telecommunications technology. We're doing this through a relatively new effort, USDA's broadband loan program, and some of the

other initiatives that are part of the President's 2004 budget request that will be announced in more detail next week.

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“Today we are publishing in the Federal Register guidelines for Rural Telecommunications Providers so they can begin applying for more than \$1.4 billion in loans and loan guarantees. These loans will allow entities and rural communities throughout our nation to advance new telecommunications and web technologies in rural areas. These technologies are critical to our rural infrastructure. And it's a program that we started as a pilot just two years ago.

“The expansion of these technologies will help better equip our rural communities to enhance opportunities for overall economic development. These tools can help farmers--and we're going to hear some examples of that today--and new agriculture technology-related businesses and other rural businesses. We'll see an example of distance learning. We'll see health care that's being provided to rural communities through the help of these technologies.

“To continue supporting this program, the administration will also propose investing more than \$198 million for the program in its 2004 budget. The USDA will propose spending of \$177 million in fiscal year 2004, which is an increase of over \$44 million, which will fund mostly geographic information systems, what's commonly referred as 'GIS', USDA's county service centers, which will allow farmers and ranchers to better access satellite mapping and planning information. This will allow better decisions to be made on farm and better coordination with the programs that we administer through USDA.

“As you know, the county service centers are located throughout the country and are utilized by producers to receive benefits.

“So these announcements that we make today will go a long way, not only in helping our farmers and ranchers, but also in helping our rural communities. Because as we invest in critical infrastructure resources, it will strengthen our communities, our schools, our health care, and our agriculture, and our rural businesses.

“So I want to thank Tom Dorr and Hilda Legg for all of your leadership on these programs, and we'll be looking forward to hearing from all of you as we have this opportunity for interactive participation today.”

MS. LEGG: Thank you, Secretary Veneman. It is truly wonderful to have a secretary that understands rural America.

And now I have the pleasure to introduce our Under Secretary for Rural Development, Tom Dorr. Under Secretary Dorr was appointed by President Bush and sworn into office by Secretary Ann Veneman in August 2002. Mr. Dorr has brought agricultural, financial, and business experience. He has served as a member of the Board of Directors for the Seventh District Federal Reserve Board of Chicago, the Iowa Board of Regents from 1991 to 1997, and is a member and officer of the Iowa and National Corn Growers Association.

His family farming operation in Marcus, Iowa, made use of high-speed technology to better manage his business and to be more successful as he is involved in today's digital economy.

Working with Tom Dorr keeps me moving at a high rate of speed, just to keep up. He is truly committed to expanding economic and quality of life opportunities for rural America.

Under Secretary Dorr.

UNDER SECRETARY DORR: Thank you, Hilda. Thank you, Secretary Veneman.

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I truly am pleased to be here today with both of you and to join through this video technology several families, businesses and other organizations who have and will continue to benefit from access to broadband technology. Now, let me briefly share my thoughts on USDA's commitment to enhancing economic opportunities and improving the quality of life for all rural Americans.

The Secretary's announcement of this \$1.4, nearly \$1.5 billion in broadband loan funding brings us much closer to making this vision a reality. The broadband program announced here today underscores the President's goal, announced at the Waco Economic Summit, which was that of strengthening our nation's economy.

President Bush understands that for America to compete globally it must assist in developing and making available the necessary capacity to do so. As President Bush reiterated last night, and as the Secretary did again this morning, during his State of the Union Address, the best way to support our economy and create new jobs is through business private sector development.

Building technology infrastructure that supports rural businesses is crucial to building jobs in rural America and obtaining these goals. If we are to increase economic opportunity and to improve the quality of life throughout all of rural America, it will depend on our expanding access to markets and increasing the ability of rural families and businesses to compete in a global economy. To be successful, we must be in a position to utilize the technology, which drives our competition. We must build the infrastructure that supports this technology.

This infrastructure goes beyond simply providing access to the Internet. It opens a whole new world of opportunity. When the technology is in place, businesses will increase their ability to compete in world markets, students will have access to new means of learning, and medical services in rural areas will be dramatically improved.

So without a doubt, rural America offers many advantages. It offers open spaces, a commitment to family values, and a high quality of life. But to ensure that we can create a strong rural economy, one that allows families to live and work in rural areas, we must invest in infrastructure that will attract employers and we must support efforts to bring modern advances of medical, educational, and other services to our communities.

So today we're going to hear and see some of the immediate results of how rural America benefits when it has connectivity and high-speed technology available. If we invest in the infrastructure and support local efforts, the return on this investment will pay tremendous dividends.

The ability of rural citizens and communities to have the best of both worlds, the advantage of living in a rural area, and the opportunity that is provided in centers of commerce, education, and medicine that can be bridged. This 21st Century technology initiative will be equal to that of USDA's rural electrification efforts brought about in the 20th Century. And as we work with community leaders to bring electricity to farms, ranches, and rural communities, we will again work with community leaders to bring new technology infrastructure to rural businesses, schools medical facilities, farmers, ranchers, and the list goes on.

I believe that given the tools, rural citizens will take the reins and bridge the digital divide, and will harness the opportunity for economic growth and a higher quality of life.

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So today it gives all three of us a great deal of pleasure to begin taking a short, but we hope, fun and interesting virtual tour across the country.

We're going to begin this tour in North Central Kansas, in the community of Pittsburgh, which is the headquarters of the Rural Telephone Service Company, which through its subsidiary, Nextex, utilized our USDA's rural broadband pilot program last year to help bring broadband, or high-speed capacity, to three communities in rural Kansas. These communities have a combined population of only 5,000. But as we've heard, those 5,000 are part of the 60 million men, women, and children, who make up our vital and important rural America.

Our Rural Telephone Service Company's CEO, Larry Sevier, is going to tell us how his company worked to bring broadband to these areas. We'll also hear from the president of a local agribusiness company that Larry's been working with along with the farmer. So, Larry, could you tell us a bit about your vision and about how your company went about to bring all of this a reality in Pittsburgh, Kansas, and the surrounding area?

MR. SEVIER: Thank you, Under Secretary Dorr. I would be glad to. Our headquarters is actually located in Lenora, Kansas, which is a small northwestern Kansas community. We're located here today in Phillipsburg, Kansas, to make these announcements. But we utilize the original RUS loan program for our telephone company, serving approximately 12,000 access lines in Northwestern and North Central Kansas, over 5400 square miles. So you can see it's rather sparse out here, but yet 80 percent of our customers have access to broadband services.

Through the use of the new pilot program for this new broadband loan program, we were able to bring services, broadband services to three communities that have never had access to broadband services before. Those are Norton, Almena, and Osborne. We built a fiber-to-the-home technology and have a tremendous tech rate, 80 to 90 percent of the businesses and residential people in those communities have taken our service and at least 10 percent of those have signed up for our broadband service which has speeds up to 40 megabyte.

So this has opened up a whole new technology and something that these businesses have really looked forward to and can take advantage of now.

I know I'm short on time but I do want to thank Secretary Veneman, Under Secretary Dorr, and President Bush for their investment in rural America through this program, and I also want to thank our congressional representatives for their support of this because I know they did support it, and Hilda Legg, administrator, we appreciate you administering this program. Thank you very much.

MR. DORR: Larry, are you going to give us an opportunity to hear, briefly, from Mr. Thiebault, in terms of how Osborne has been able to use the extra capacity we give them? and I might add, that as a former farmer and hog producer in Iowa, I followed with a great deal of interest, over the years, the initiatives of Osborne Industries. So I really do appreciate this opportunity to have Mr. Thiebault with us.

MR. THIEBAULT: Thanks very much for having me, and in order to understand what broadband has meant to our small company, I think you need to understand what our company

is. We've been in existence for about 30 years, located in Osborne, Kansas, a town of about 1800 people. We employ a 100 people, six or eight of those people are either farmers' spouses or farmers who would not probably otherwise be able to continue on the farm, if it were not for the supplemental income that they receive from their job with us.

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As you can imagine, a hundred jobs in a town of 1800 is very, very important. Recognizing this situation, Osborne Industries has worked very hard to diversify our business and develop unique manufacturing processes and products that present substantial barriers to our competitors.

This effort has been to maintain our stable base of employees. Consequently, the company is very diversified for a small company our size.

We serve two different markets. The company molds relatively large, highly-engineered close tolerance plastic parts for other manufacturers. We call this our OEM business . We currently have about 20 customers and they're located from Texas to Minnesota, and from here to the East Coast. The other half of our business is what you referred to, is the production, development for production and distribution and marketing of management equipment and systems for commercial hog production.

A substantial part of this equipment and these systems is based on radio frequency identification and computer systems that help producers efficiently manage the care of these animals. We market this equipment all across the United States, primarily in the hog production country and in several foreign countries.

Now our rural location provides a lot of benefits for our company. We enjoy a stable hard-working labor force, low crime, a supportive community and a two-minute commute to work. However, the company works at a disadvantage to many of our competitors because of our rural location. Most of our competitors are closer to suppliers, closer to customers [audio out] with regular dial-up Internet, we could download that same information but it could take hours.

If the telephone line even blinked during those hours of downloading, you could start all over again.

Sometimes the integrity of the data was so questionable, that you were better off waiting for good data via the mail. With high-speed Internet all that changes. We can now download design drawings and specifications for parts in seconds, and that data is very, very reliable, and we can download that from virtually any place in the world.

We can now log in to our customers' computers and directly see their production requirements. This allows us a great deal of production scheduling efficiency, and the efficiency improves our service to our customer.

We can even log into the trucking company's computer and track incoming shipments of raw materials and outgoing customer shipments. It's an invaluable tool in order to better serve our customer from a rural location.

Probably what intrigues me the most about high-speed Internet is that our engineers and service people can now connect directly from their desk to one of our animal management system installations in the country. That customer can be located anywhere so long as they have access to the Internet. Our people can then diagnose the problems that they may be having,

download software upgrades, and maybe help that customer better interpret the data that he's getting from our equipment.

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The effect on our customers of this kind of service is just absolutely remarkable. So even though we've just begun to use high-speed Internet, we certainly appreciate it, and it is helping us to stay viable in a rural area. We thank Rural Telephone and the RUS for allowing us to have that service.

MR DORR: Stan, before we shift to Mr. Cox, I think the Secretary might have a question for you on the ability to directly connect to the farmer from your site.

Madam Secretary.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “Well, I appreciate the description of your business and how it really has been this, as you say, an equalizer, disadvantaged equalizer, because if we are going to attract new businesses and sustain businesses in rural America, this is just the way we need to do it, and one of the things, obviously, is just the interactivity with farmers all around the country, because you are providing a service to them.

“I would ask you about whether or not you feel that there are areas of the country we need to focus our attention on in terms of allowing you to better interact with your customers?”

MR. THIEBAULT: I expect there is. I don't think that I'm really qualified to give you any help in that area. Obviously all our customers are in very rural areas, so there are many of those customers who do not have access to this kind of technology and any time that they could be provided that would be a very big help to us in order to reach those customers and service them better.

MR. DORR: Thank you.

Mr. Cox, do you have a few comments that you'd care to share with us, briefly.

MR. COX: Yes. My family and I, we live in Norton. I have three kids in the school system and my wife teaches there at the Norton schools. I use my high-speed connection to check on commodity quotes, I do some commodity trading, and then also to get professional analysis.

During my critical times of planting my corn or soybeans, wheat, I'm always watching the weather and I can either call up and have my wife check radar maps, or I go to the NOA Web site and check long-term drought maps.

But I use it a lot, especially if you're out there harvesting, if you can get up-to-date radar, and put the radar in motion, it gives you an idea on how, tracking a storm, and so I find that very helpful.

Also I can get crop progress, accumulated growing degrees, which will tell me how my crop is progressing throughout the summer. When I'm planting my crop, I can go in and access soil

temperatures. So there's a wide variety of information that is available at the touch of a fingertip.

I mainly use it for information-gathering and research on new chemicals, new seeds, new equipment, and new ways of farming. I don't buy a lot of products on line. I still like to buy from my local people because my local guy's service being better than I feel that I'd be able to get from just buying the cheapest product, you know, whether it be from two or three states away.

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My wife is currently getting her master's degree in special education and she has been having to travel three hours roundtrip to continue her master's.

This semester, she's able to take a class on line, and that has saved a lot of travel time and I get another evening of a home-cooked meal.

MR. DORR: Thank you. We'd like to take a little trip with the Secretary, now, to another part of the country, but we really appreciate the input and the insight you folks from Osborne, Kansas, have been able to share with us.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “ Thank you, and I really appreciate the good segue that you gave us to our next opportunity for meeting with people in another part of the country, and that is Virginia, because as you talk about your wife and the distance learning, one of the great opportunities for this is in distance learning, and that will be a segment that we talk about at the end when we go on to our last part of this tour.

“But we're going to talk, now, about another opportunity for use of this technology and that is in the area of telemedicine. We know that health care and health care opportunities and patient care is a huge issue in rural America ,having access to the best medical care, and one of the great uses of this technology is through what we call telemedicine, and through telemedicine, we will be able and are able to link some of the best doctors at some of the best institutions with people in rural communities to get the kind of health care that they need and deserve.

“So with that, we're going to move to Charlottesville, Virginia, where we're going to hear from Dr. Karen Rheuban, who's going to give us a brief overview of UVA's telemedicine program, and then she will directly introduce us to a young man and his family who have benefited tremendously from this technology.

So with that, do we have--we haven't seen Dr. Rheuban on the screen yet, but do we have here?”

MS. LEGG: Virginia, are you there?

DR. RHEUBAN: Good morning. Can you see me and hear me now?

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “There you are. Good morning.”

DR. RHEUBAN: Good morning.

MR. DORR: Good morning.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Welcome.

DR. RHEUBAN: Thank you. Good morning from the Office of Telemedicine at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Secretary Veneman, Under Secretary Dorr, Administrator Legg, Mrs. Purcell, it is a tremendous pleasure to join you for this announcement of the USDA's new program designed to advance the deployment of broadband telecommunications technologies to rural communities across our nation, and the services that will accompany such connectivity.

We are grateful for the efforts of President Bush and Secretary Veneman for this initiative with such profound implications for our rural constituents.

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With the support of the USDA's telemedicine and distance-learning grant program, and funding from other federal and state agencies, the University of Virginia has established a 35 site telemedicine network in the Commonwealth of Virginia, linking community hospitals, community health centers, schools, prisons, and other sites with our university.

In this program, we provide access to specialty health care services and educational services otherwise not locally available.

To date, we have supported more than 5,200 clinical encounters and broadcast thousands of hours of vital health professional and patient education. We have saved lives, as you will hear shortly from our colleagues in Winchester, Virginia, reduced the burden of unnecessary and costly travel for disabled and other citizens, and reduced the sense of isolation experienced by many rural health practitioners and the patients that they serve.

We provide regular educational offerings to rural students in a community otherwise relatively inaccessible and we have even broadcast a Nobel laureate speaking at the University of Virginia to those students in Southwest Virginia.

By early spring of this year, we plan to connect another eight sites in rural mountainous Western Virginia, to include such regions as Bath and Highland Counties, where the population density is less than ten persons per square mile and the geography is harsh but where the citizens are just as desirous and deserving of quality health care, education, and economic opportunities.

But we cannot connect where telecommunications infrastructure has not yet been deployed, and we have found that without competition in the telecommunications marketplace, the cost of such connectivity remains prohibitive for rural community hospitals and clinics.

This morning, we are honored to have with us colleagues and visitors at the Winchester Medical Center in Winchester, Virginia, Northwestern Virginia, one of our partner telemedicine sites.

Winchester serves citizens in Eastern West Virginia and Northwest Virginia.

I'd like to introduce both my colleagues here, Mr. Eugene Sullivan, my director of telemedicine, and Mr. Patrick Cary who is the general field representative for the USDA, and then my colleagues in Winchester that include Dr. Teresa Clawson, neonatologist, Brenda Potter, the technical coordinator of the telemedicine program, and the family of our mutual patient, Dheva Muthuramalingam, a healthy 3-year-old whose life was saved by the use of telemedicine.

Dheva was born with a rare congenital heart defect. On January 1st, 2000, Winchester phoned seeking assistance with this infant with suspected congenital heart disease.

I was the pediatric cardiologist on call that day. From my office in Charlottesville, using telemedicine technology, I reviewed his cardiac ultrasound and identified a rare congenital heart defect.

Dr. Clawson and her colleagues immediately instituted life-saving measures and transferred Dheva to the University of Virginia where he underwent emergency open-heart surgery.

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Had we not instituted these timely measures, Dheva would not have survived but a few hours. Today, he is a healthy 3-year-old and I am honored to introduce him, his parents, and I understand that his grandfather is actually a U.S. Department of Agriculture employee in rural West Virginia, by coincidence.

So I'd like to connect down to Winchester.

MS. : Yes, ma'am, we're here.

MS. : Good morning.

DR. CLAWSON: Good morning.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: "Good morning.

MR. DORR: Hi, Dheva.

MS. : Hi. Say hi.

MR. : Can you say hi?

MS. : Say hi.

DR. CLAWSON: Dheva is a healthy 3-year-old now thanks to the assistance of telemedicine and Dr. Rheuban at the University of Virginia. Good morning. I'm Dr. Teresa Clawson. My partner, Dr. Edward Lee and I, are neonatologists at Winchester Medical Center.

We are considered a rural hospital. We do provide neonatal intensive care to critically ill and preterm newborns. But Dr. Lee and I are the only pediatric sub specialists at this hospital, and we are geographically somewhat isolated by the mountainous region around us.

When we receive babies who have critical heart lesions, we need help in the diagnosis of those lesions, and the service through telemedicine has been critically important to us in providing efficient life-saving care to those infants who do have unusual congenital heart lesions that are not easily discerned by our adult cardiologists.

That was the case for this young man. Three years ago, my partner, Dr. Lee, admitted him, and he was a critically-ill newborn. He had factors in his history that could have pointed to something other than a congenital heart lesion and the use of telemedicine and Dr. Rheuban's

assistance was absolutely life-saving, and declaring his diagnosis definitively, and getting him efficiently to a cardiac surgeon for repair.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “Well, thank you, and are we going to hear a word from Diva and his parents?”

MS. : My dad can.

MR. : [inaudible].

MS. : Go ahead.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “This is your father who works for USDA?”
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MR. : My father-in-law. (Dr. Chinnathambi Sirinivasan) Yeah.

MS. : Yeah; uh-huh.

MR. DORR: How come you're not on the job?

[Laughter.]

DR: SIRINIVASAN: I have a leave.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “Can I ask where you work in USDA?”

DR. SIRINIVASAN: I work in [inaudible] Appalachian [unintell.]. I work as a geneticist and biotechnologist there.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Terrific. “Well, we're so pleased that you're able to be with us on this part of our USDA mission today.”

MS. : Nice to see you, Secretary Veneman. So we are very pleased that--

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “We're losing sound, I think.”

MS. LEGG: Did you just mute? Winchester, we can't hear the gentleman anymore.

[Pause.]

MS. LEGG: Kansas, are you there?

[No response.]

MS. : Virginia? The other site in Virginia.

DR. RHEUBAN: Well, we're still here. That's technology. Somebody might have leaned on the mute button, for all I know.

We actually provide services throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia and we provide life-saving services, but also just regular screening mechanisms. With our most recent USDA

grant, we have actually purchased equipment so that we can provide diabetic patients the opportunity to have life-saving ophthalmologic care. Blindness is a major complication of diabetes as well and so we now screen diabetic patients.

We provide services in 24 other specialties and subspecialties. So I'm sorry about the little glitch in the telecommunications but we're always learning. But we do want to express our profound appreciation to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for investing in our rural communities and for taking such a leadership role in facilitating mechanisms by which our rural citizens can have access to the services they so very much deserve.

Thank you for inviting us to join you today.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “Well, thank you so much and we're sorry we didn't get to hear a little bit more of the personal side of Diva's story, but we know from what you've told us, and what the doctor in Winchester has told us, that without this technology Diva would not have been able to survive and we're so pleased that we're able to be a part of the tremendous benefits of this technology through telemedicine.

“With that, we are going to move to our final site today, which is in Mississippi and it is at Whitman High School and it is--we are going to learn at Whitman High School about how this technology and having access to high-speed Internet access can help students learn things they might not have otherwise learned.

“So I can see them now coming up on the screen and we really appreciate the opportunity to have you with us today, and we see your sign up there, and thank you, and welcome to USDA through this technology and we look forward to hearing about how this technology has helped your school, and I'd first like to call upon the principal, Charles Parkerson, to say a few words, and then introduce the other folks that you have with us today. I know you have some students that are going to talk about how much this has changed the way [audio out] heard about things that they're studying in school. So Principal.”

MR. PARKERSON: First of all, I'd like to say good morning, Secretary Veneman, and I'd like to thank the president and you yourself for the efforts that you've made to help education in rural school districts like ours in Mississippi. Your efforts have not gone unnoticed and we do appreciate everything you do for us.

Here at Whitman High School, we are able to offer a class called oral communications to our students who otherwise without the distance-learning technology would not be able to take this course. We actually take this course from a school in the Delta which is located about 300 miles away from us, and our students are actually able to sit in the classroom here at Whitman High School and take the course from a teacher at Simmons High School via the distance learning center.

Also through this technology we are able to offer Spanish I to two different high schools throughout the state. One of them is located in the Delta, in [inaudible], Mississippi, and the other one is in Wilkinson County, and through this, providing one teacher--ordinarily, in Mississippi, the maximum a teacher will ever have in a particular classroom is thirty.

In our particular class, we have about eight students who sit in the classroom here at Whitman High School, and the other two sites house about fifteen. So there's about 38 students who are able to benefit from one certified school teacher here in Mississippi, and so not only is Whitman High School benefiting from your generosity through the grant. Other schools

around the State of Mississippi are also benefiting from it as well. I also have two students here with me.

I have Daphne Daughtery who takes the oral communications class, and I have Terrell Howard who is in our Spanish I class that we teach two other schools each day.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Great. “Well, we would love the opportunity to just hear a little bit from the students about how this technology and how the distance learning has helped them in their own curriculum.”

[Technical interruption from D.C.]

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “Too close to another microphone, because there's static after the end of every word. Is there any way you could adjust your audio output?”

MR. SEVIER: I don't believe so. Ours are pretty much fixed to the ceiling, so I wouldn't know how to get the microphones away from each other.

[Laughter.]

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “Why don't we go ahead with the students and we'll see if we can get good sound on them?”

Daphne, do you want to go first?”

MS. DAUGHTERY: Good morning. Yes ma'am. I take the Oral Communications Class that's offered at Whitman High School. The class is taught by Ms. Johnson from Simmons High School. There are about six or seven of us that take this class, and we wouldn't be able to take it without the technology that we have now, because it wouldn't have been offered at the school. And it's going to help me in my chosen career, because I intend to go to college and become an archeologist and become a professor. And an oral communications class will help me to be able to get up in front of the students and talk and have the communications that I would need to have. So, I'm very grateful for this technology.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: Terrell?

MR. HOWARD: Good morning. [inaudible] In our class we [inaudible] classrooms. [inaudible] education, and I'm going to be teaching [inaudible] language.

SECRETARY VENEMAN: “Great. Well, as I listen to you talk about this technology, particularly the students, I think about what President Bush says so often, and that is that he wants no child left behind in this country. And what I see for this technology is the tremendous opportunity that you students are having through this technology so that you have access to things you would no have otherwise been able to take in your school curriculum.

“So I think this really, really helps the President, and his vision of no child being left behind. And we can see through this the tremendous promise of this technology for the future and for students all around this great country.

“So I want to thank all of you for being with us today. I want to thank you for sharing your story. I want to thank those in Virginia, those in Kansas who have shared other ways that this

technology is making a tremendous difference in the lives of students, in the lives of patients, in the lives of rural communities and rural businesses, in the lives of farmers and ranchers.

“And it's just a great opportunity for us to learn about how we can change the access of rural America to so many opportunities. And I just want to thank everybody who participated today. I truly want to thank Under Secretary Dorr and Hilda Legg for their proactivity in making this program a reality and really making the difference in rural America.”

MS. LEGG: Thank you, Secretary Veneman, for that tour through rural America and the exciting message that we received from the recipients of the broadband technology. You and Under Secretary Dorr. Again, your leadership and your support have been tremendous. And this is just a taste. We could replicate this many times over.

So, all of you [inaudible] today through our webcasting and through our participants, on behalf of USDA and all of us here who believe so much that this infrastructure is critical to the development of rural America, quality of life there, we thank you very sincerely.

I also want to just mention to you that, of course, this broadcast can be found, the streaming of today's program and the details, on our website, www.usda.gov. And I would be remiss if I did not say a personal thank you to Roberta Purcell and all of the telecommunications staff here for helping us put this program into action.

And to all of those who joined us [inaudible] director, Mr. Dorr, Chuck Banks from Kansas, and our field staff from the USDA that were out there, thank you for being a part of it. We are all here today to play a role in making the quality of life better for the folks that we serve, and we're especially grateful for President Bush and his leadership, and Secretary Veneman, and Under Secretary Dorr.

To each and every one of you, have a great day, and thanks so much.

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