



Driving opportunity, prosperity in rural America

Packerland Broadband

Wisconsin and Michigan, USA



Every week, staff at Packerland Broadband get hundreds of calls from people in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan asking if the internet service provider (ISP) can extend service to them, explains Cory Heigl, Vice President of Packerland. “We’re part of these communities. We didn’t want to say no anymore. Everyone deserves a connection.”

Yet the region Packerland serves is like much of rural America: low population density and challenging geography impede small ISPs from reaching everyone through traditional wired and wireless broadband technology and still keep access affordable.

This year Packerland joined other ISPs in [Microsoft’s Airband Initiative](#), which helps underserved communities get online nationally and globally. By using TV white spaces (TVWS)—unused channels of television airwaves—to broadcast an internet signal, Airband partners like Packerland are changing the narrative in rural America.

19.4 million

The number of rural Americans who don't have access to broadband internet

82,000

The number of people who will be covered by Packerland's expanded internet services by 2022

2 million

The number of rural Americans who Microsoft has pledged to cover with broadband internet access by partnering with ISPs across the country by 2022

TVWS bridges opportunity gaps

TVWS radios are mounted on high points in communities—on farm silos or water towers, for instance—that emit broadband to be received by antennas on homes, schools and businesses. The signals can penetrate natural and manmade obstacles, making the wireless option a good fit for hilly and forested regions like Wisconsin and Michigan.

"Seeing that Microsoft launched this initiative kicked us in the pants to solve the problem of rural access in our communities," Heigl says. "We're a small provider, so we don't have equity to invest and research opportunities on our own. Microsoft helps us reach for the stars."

Here's how:

Technical expertise and guidance. Airband staff are "trusted advisers" that provide unbiased information on hardware and advice on how to best leverage the technology for greatest impact, Heigl says. Airband staff also fly out to help with build-outs and train ISP staff.

Best practices. Applying TVWS for internet access is a relatively new technology, so the Airband team shares learning from ISP partners across the globe.

Policy. "Microsoft has the muscle to make sure the rural voice is heard," Heigl says. As part of Packerland's partnership with the Airband Initiative, for instance, Heigl joined representatives from other small ISPs to lobby the Federal Communications Commission to continue allowing companies to innovate using TVWS.

Hardware and cloud services. In the communities Packerland serves, customers want to get online but don't know how to set up new connected devices or even where to buy them, Heigl says. So as part of its partnership with Microsoft, Packerland will be selling Windows devices bundled with Office 365 and other cloud services so the ISP can be a one-stop-shop for customers. "Bringing cloud services and hardware so customers are comfortable connecting in their home with technology they trust, and which their ISP enables and supports, helps us promote digital literacy," Heigl says.

Bringing internet to new rural customers

Packerland is building out its TVWS infrastructure beginning summer 2018 to complement its fiber, satellite, and current fixed wireless internet distribution systems. The technical ecosystem allows the ISP to advance its goal of extending high-speed internet access to tens of thousands of new customers.

"Not one of our communities' population has increased in recent censuses, but building up infrastructure like internet access can drive economics," Heigl says. "We know we're helping rural American prosper again."

"We can't do this on our own. Microsoft has our back, sees the same vision we do, and is aggregating partners across the U.S. and the globe to do something about the problem of rural internet access."

- Cory Heigl, vice president of Packerland Broadband

Packerland Broadband provides reliable high-speed connectivity to rural areas. It currently serves 60 communities in northern Wisconsin and Michigan and is expanding to help bridge the digital divide in underserved areas.

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