



Middle-Mile Solution: Dairyland Power Cooperative Bridges the Broadband Gap

Situation

In the rural regions of western Wisconsin, northeast Iowa, southeast Minnesota, and northwest Illinois, many communities continue to face a persistent challenge: lack of reliable, high-speed internet. While Dairyland Power Cooperative is not a broadband provider, it is a power generation and transmission cooperative and recognizes the critical need for broadband in the areas it serves. The company's existing infrastructure, built for internal communications, presents a unique opportunity to support broadband expansion in these underserved areas.

Response

Dairyland Power Cooperative operates a robust fiber and microwave network for operational communications between substations. As the company transitioned toward more fiber-based infrastructure for reliability, it identified a strategic opportunity: leverage its transmission lines to support middle-mile broadband infrastructure.

To achieve this goal, Dairyland set forth a plan.

- **Middle-Mile Grant:** Dairyland pursued a federal Middle-Mile Broadband Infrastructure Grant aimed at expanding broadband access by funding the infrastructure that connects core networks to local last-mile providers.
- **Engaged with a broadband consultant** to navigate the unfamiliar grant landscape.
- **Formed a dedicated internal team** to manage the application process.
- **A full engineering and cost analysis** was completed before applying for funding, ensuring a well-prepared and credible proposal.

Outcomes

- **Grant Awarded:** In June 2023, Dairyland was awarded a federal middle-mile grant to install 240-miles of Optical Ground Wire (OPGW), a durable fiber optic cable integrated into transmission lines.
- **Regional Impact:** Once completed by 2026, the network will span four states and provide critical infrastructure to support last-mile broadband providers.
- **Catalyst for Connectivity:** The project will reduce the cost and complexity for ISPs to expand into rural areas, enabling service to previously unviable communities.
- **Durable Infrastructure:** The OPGW installation offers a 40+ year lifespan, ensuring long-term value and resilience.

Lessons Learned

- **Know What You are Signing Up For:** Understanding the full scope and criteria of a grant is essential. Dairyland's success was rooted in its thorough preparation and engineering foresight.
- **Invest in Expertise:** Bringing in a consultant helped the team navigate unfamiliar territory and avoid costly missteps.

- **Plan for the Long Haul:** Winning the grant is just the beginning. Meeting milestones and maintaining compliance throughout the installation is critical to securing funding and delivering on promises.
- **Think Beyond Your Mission:** Even organizations outside the traditional broadband space can play a transformative role in digital equity when they leverage their assets creatively.

Learn More

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