

Brussels, 3 March 2009

Better high-speed internet access needed to revitalise Europe's rural regions, says Commission

Connecting the 30% of the EU's rural population that has no high speed internet access should be a priority for achieving 'broadband for all' by 2010, the Commission said today. Improved internet connectivity is a powerful tool to stimulate swift economic recovery. The Commission today outlines how it would use its own support programmes to boost internet networks and services in rural areas, and called on EU Member States to do the same. Good internet access can make farms and companies in rural areas, especially small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), less isolated and more competitive through access to international markets and faster and more efficient ways of doing business. Meanwhile, the European Parliament and the Council are discussing a Commission proposal to make a further € 1 billion available through the European Economic Recovery Plan to spread high speed internet access more widely across all regions of Europe.

"In the 21st century, many of us would say that we just can't do without Information and Communication Technologies – certainly in the office, and perhaps even in our homes. Why should rural areas put up with patchy access to this tool?" said Mariann Fischer Boel, European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development. "If we're serious about having prosperous and vibrant rural areas, we still need to help everyone get the most out of modern technologies."

"We must do our utmost to bringing internet technologies to all citizens of Europe. Internet technologies contribute to half of productivity growth in the EU, and the EU's Member States cannot afford their rural areas missing out on this potential, especially not in these times of economic crisis," said Viviane Reding, Commissioner for Information Society and Media. "Broadband is an indispensable tool for businesses in rural areas, particularly SMEs who depend on a high-speed connection to the rest of the economy. I call on the Council to help us ensure that these businesses are not let down by giving a strong signal in support of broadband for all Europeans."

While an average 93% of Europeans can enjoy access to a high speed online connection, the figure is only 70% in rural areas, and in some countries (such as Greece, Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania) high speed broadband internet networks cover just 50% or less of the rural population.

The Commission, in a Communication adopted today, outlines the benefits which better access of rural areas to modern Information and Communication Technologies like the internet can bring to businesses and individuals in rural areas, like farms and food producers.

For example, 80% of Swedish farms already have access to the internet, and a third of them use the internet daily (a third also use the internet to submit applications for EU support). However, in other regions such as Tuscany (Italy) and Hungary, only a quarter of farmers use the internet, making it harder to plan production, market products and access prices in international markets, check weather forecasts or establish cooperation agreements with other market players. Farmers are not the only ones missing out: across Europe, only 22.5% of people in rural areas use e-government services like lodging tax returns, compared to 32.9% in urban areas.

The Commission therefore calls on Member States, regions (including local authorities) to consider adapting their rural development programmes to place adequate emphasis on information and communication technologies and on internet connectivity, especially within the mid-term review of their rural development plans due in 2010.

Background

The EU addresses the EU's "internet broadband gap" between urban and rural areas through rural development policy – which forms part of the Common Agricultural Policy. Member States and regions can spend EU funding for modernising, through the use of new technologies, farms, training, caring for the environment, setting up new businesses and basic services in rural areas.

In addition, about €15 billion is being spent on information and communication technologies priorities under the EU's Cohesion Policy for 2007 -2013 –on e-public services and internet infrastructure, for example. Some of this will be spent in rural areas.

On 28 January 2009, the Commission, in line with the European Council conclusions of December 2008, proposed to earmark €1 billion of extra spending for investment in broadband as part of its proposed European Economic Recovery Plan, with the goal of achieving 100% high speed broadband internet coverage for Europe ([MEMO/09/35](#)). As a complement to today's Communication on better access for rural areas to modern information and communication technologies, the Commission is organising an [EU conference on broadband in Turin \(Italy\) on 2-3 April 2009](#). The event will bring together the Commission, national and regional authorities and other interested parties to discuss the increased EU investment in broadband under the EU recovery plan and the policies that will help achieve 100% broadband coverage in rural areas.

Today's Communication on better access for rural areas to modern ICT is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/employment/ict/index_en.htm

[MEMO/09/92](#)

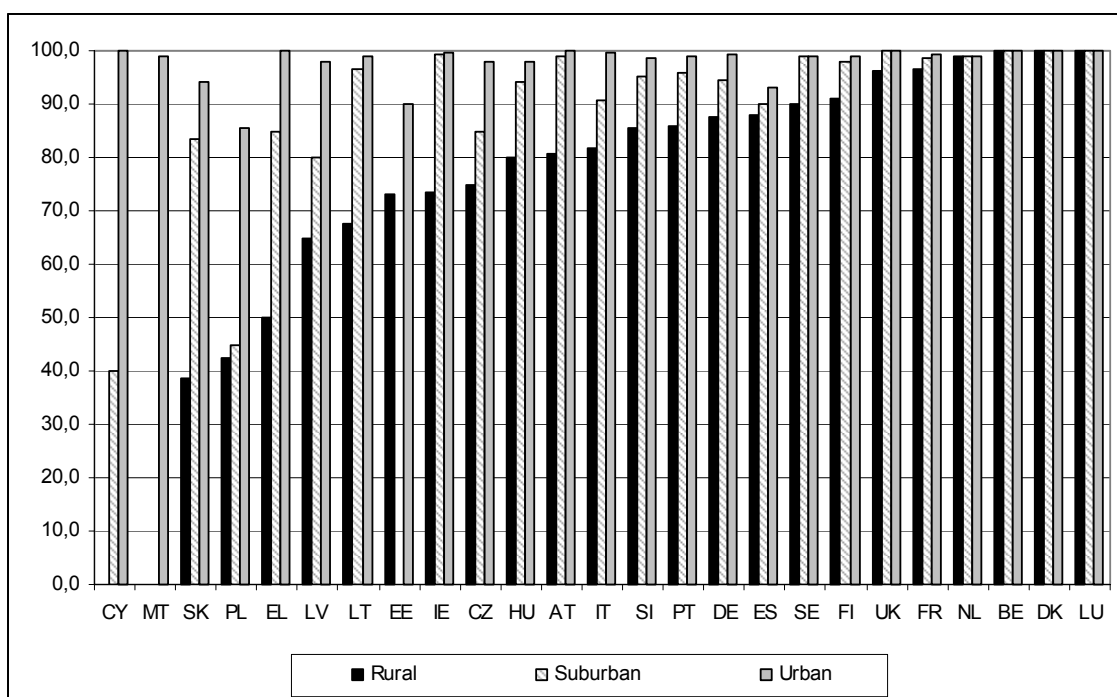
Annex
Broadband coverage of population, December 2007

2007				
	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Total
AT	100%	99%	81%	92%
BE	100%	100%	100%	100%
BG	n.a.	n.a.	0%	n.a.
CY	100%	40%	0%	80%
CZ	98%	85%	75%	85%
DK	100%	100%	100%	100%
EE	90%	0%	73%	85%
FI	99%	98%	91%	96%
FR	99%	99%	97%	99%
DE	99%	95%	88%	96%
GR	100%	85%	50%	86%
HU	98%	94%	80%	91%
IS	100%	0%	79%	92%
IE	100%	99%	73%	89%
IT	100%	91%	82%	94%
LV	98%	80%	65%	87%
LT	99%	97%	68%	88%
LU	100%	100%	100%	100%
MT	99%	Not relevant	Not relevant	99%
NL	99%	99%	99%	99%
NO	98%	96%	94%	96%
PL	86%	45%	43%	64%
PT	99%	96%	86%	95%
RO	n.a.	n.a.	0%	n.a.
SK	94%	84%	39%	74%
SI	99%	95%	86%	92%
ES	93%	90%	88%	91%
SE	99%	99%	90%	98%
UK	100%	100%	96%	100%
EU 25+2	98%	92%	80%	93%
EU 27+2	n.a.	n.a.	70%	n.a.

Data source: IDATE Study "Broadband Coverage in Europe 2008"

Data for urban, suburban areas and for the national average in Bulgaria and Romania are not available. Rural coverage in these countries is 0 and this allows the calculation of rural coverage for EU27 + 2.

% of total territory covered by fixed broadband, Dec 2007



Note: No data for rural areas in Malta and Cyprus

Source: Rural development statistical report 2008, European Commission