

# Utility company planning to roll out

BY RILEY MORNINGSTAR  
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SENECA — Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative is aiming to roll out a high-speed internet pilot program as early as next spring.

In an announcement made earlier this week,

the cooperative announced it has partnered with West Carolina Telephone Cooperative to begin supplying high-speed internet across its five-county service territory of Anderson, Greenville, Oconee, Pickens and Spartanburg counties. Blue Ridge will be work-

ing with WCFIBER, a subsidiary of the company based in Abbeville.

"Its employee team has a proven record of accomplishment in delivering high-speed internet service to rural areas, coupled with impeccable customer service," Blue Ridge president and CEO

Jim Lovinggood said in a news release.

The announcement comes on the heels of the cooperative wrapping up a two-year feasibility study of bringing high-speed internet to its ratepayers across the 1,800 square

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miles it covers. The study revealed there was "an obvious need" for high-speed service across "large portions" of the coverage map, the release said.

Blue Ridge vice president of economic development and government relations Zachary Hinton told The Journal "major construction projects" are aiming to begin in some areas of service next spring, and installations could start by next summer.

"This is a long build-out that will take quite a while," Hinton said. "We ask for folks' patience as we build out the system in hopes of eventually serving all of our members who request service."

Blue Ridge, which services more than 67,000 members, has been adamant it does not want customers to bear the costs of improved internet.

"We definitely want to avoid any member subsidies being utilized to underwrite this project, and so our plan is to go down this path gradually," Lovinggood said. "This will allow us to test and refine our process. Once the pilot program is finished and we're satisfied with the results, we'll then be in a position to expand into other locations."

Lovinggood said there are also plans to include fiber connecting directly into the home through the company's broadband package.

By taking what it calls a conservative path, Blue Ridge is banking on chipping away at its grid until all customers have access through its more than 7,000 miles of power lines. On the final day of the recent S.C. General Assembly session in September, legislators unanimously passed a bill giving incentives to smaller power companies and cooperatives to allow internet provider service alongside electrical lines to bring high-speed internet to rural communities. Approximately 650,000 of the 5 million people in South Carolina don't have access to broadband internet.

Blue Ridge will be able to tap into this legislation by using existing power lines and easements to expedite the extensions of fiber cable.

*The Associated Press  
contributed to this report.*

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## high-speed internet

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Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative president and CEO