

BROADBAND

\$24M awarded to provide internet access in Oconee, Pickens counties

THE JOURNAL STAFF

PICKENS — Local communities in Oconee and Pickens counties with little to no internet access could have access to high-speed fiber service by the end of 2023, thanks to a multimillion-dollar grant awarded to provide service to rural and underserved areas.

Upcountry Fiber, an internet provider created by Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative

and WCFIBER, a subsidiary of West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative, has been awarded a \$24 million grant from the American Rescue Plan Act funds appropriation bill to increase service, according to a news release from Upcountry Fiber.

The release estimated the grant would provide high-speed fiber internet to about 8,200

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new customers in rural and underserved areas in Oconee and Pickens counties by the end of the year.

The release said Upcountry Fiber officials plan to use the grant "build out its network" for service in the Coneross, Fair Play, Long Creek, Mountain Rest, Oakway and Toccoa Highway areas of Oconee County. In Pickens County, the Rocky Bottom area north of S.C. Highway 11 in Pickens County and the Shady Grove area in Pickens are expected to have access to service through work paid for through the grant, according to the release.

"We are very thankful that our legislators have ensured rural and underserved communities in Oconee and Pickens counties have even more potential for competitive growth by allocating funds to build out this necessary utility ser-

vice," Blue Ridge CEO Jim Lovinggood said.



Lovinggood

"This is a win for everyone," added WCFIBER President and CEO Jeff Wilson. "This not only benefits people in their homes, but makes it possible for them to have access to better health care, education and job opportunities."

In addition to the work through the grant, Upcountry Fiber is also continuing to build out its network in area of Salem in Oconee County, as well as northern Greenville County, according to the release.

Since its public launch in June 2021, Upcountry has completed more than 1,600 miles of high-speed fiber in mostly rural areas in Pickens and Oconee counties, with 8,000 households, businesses and schools served.