

ORAL HISTORY  
CHRISTOPHER MCLEAN  
ADMINISTRATOR, RURAL UTILITY SERVICE - 12/18/00

00:00:20:13 Q: Today is December 18th of the year 2000. I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington. Today we're visiting with Christopher McLean who is the Administrator of the Rural Utility Service at USDA.

00:00:34:29 A: Hi Larry.

00:00:35:15 Q: How are you today?

00:00:36:15 A: Great.

00:00:37:20 Q: Let's talk about some of the background that you brought to your work here at USDA. I know that you worked for many years on Capitol Hill. Tell us about that period.

00:00:47:15 A: I came to Washington, D.C. in 1982 to go to graduate school at Georgetown University and was getting an advanced degree in law at Georgetown. I started working in 1982 for Senator Jim Eckson (ph.) who is the

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Democratic senator from the state of Nebraska. I worked fourteen and a half years for the senator.

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So from '82 until 1997 when he retired I was on the senator's personal staff. Senator Eckson served on the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Senate Budget Committee and Senate Commerce Committee. I had responsibilities in budget and commerce and transportation, telecommunications and international trade.

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Then when Senator Eckson retired in 1997 I went to work for Senator Bob Kerry prior to taking a position here at the Department of Agriculture.

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Q: What was that first position here at USDA?

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A: Well I was Deputy Administrator of the Rural Utilities Service. I succeeded Adam Gladner who was a wonderful fellow who went to work for Joel Kline (ph.) as chief of staff of the anti-trust division of the Justice

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Department. I was brought to that position I think because of my work on telecommunications.

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One of the areas that Senator Eckson was very active in and one of the areas that I had a lot of responsibilities as a Senate staffer was in telecommunications. Congress had just passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, and there were some very significant provisions in that legislation for rural America to preserve and advance universal service.

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So it was a very natural fit for me to be asked to come and serve as Deputy Administrator at RUS. Our agency you know has lending programs in telecommunications and electric infrastructure, in water, waste water. We also have distance learning and telemedicine program. So it was a terrific opportunity to be able to continue that work on behalf of rural America and to really give life to that principle of universal service in being asked to join the administration and it's been a terrific honor.

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00:03:18:20 Q: So just deputy for two years. Wally Byer, the administrator of the agency, he was the last administrator of the Rural Electrification Administration and the first administrator of the Rural Utilities Service. Well, Wally retired in November of 1999. I've had a chance to lead the agency since then. Just very honored to have President Clinton's nomination in February of 2000, and the Senate acted on that nomination in the summer of 2000.

00:03:50:11 Q: Having grown up in a rural area myself I can certainly appreciate universal service because many of the years I had telephone service the phone lines would be blown down and service was more ringing the operator and it went directly to a dial telephone system. So there's been some dramatic changes in rural areas in telecommunications, and it's vital to the infrastructure for people to live in rural areas for it to improve.

00:04:19:00 A: Absolutely. One of the principles in that telecommunications legislation is that there should be

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comparable rates and comparable services between rural and urban America and that all parts of this country should have access to advanced services.

00:04:35:00 The mission of the Rural Utility Service is to do just that. We were very lucky to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the origination of the telephone program while I was at the agency. It really provided us a great retrospective on how far we've come. In 1940, 1949, when the rural electrification amendments for telecommunications were signed into law about 40% of American farmers had telecommunications service.

00:05:09:12 Today there's almost parody in terms of telephone penetration. Sadly, there's still some areas where folks don't have modern phone services. But we have been pushing advanced services as much as possible.

00:05:27:18 Under very important legislation that president Clinton signed into law in 1993, a bill called the Rural Electrification Loan Restructuring Act, there was an

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amendment offered by Congressman Glen English which said that we need to have state modernization planning for telecommunications and that fundamentally changed the approach of our agency then the rural electrification administration to financing telecommunications from what would be the least expensive way to do something to what is the most forward-looking way that you can afford to do things.

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So for at least those seven years since that act, and actually several years prior to that act, we have been trying to promote infrastructure that is open and capable of providing modern services. If you can get those big infrastructure investments right the plant can evolve so that you can have all the modern services including high speed internet access, including video capability on the telecommunications system.

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Whereas if we were just to try to go down the least expensive way and tolerate party line service, tolerate narrow band service, rural America would be stuck. It

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would be locked in for ten, twenty, thirty years into the digital divide.

00:06:56:05 So I'm very, very proud of what the agency has tried to do, and we have in the time that I've had responsibilities here have tried to really push the envelope to be able to close the digital divide, to be able to make sure that rural phone systems are modern and that they give rural communities access to the information economy.

00:07:21:08 Because if they don't do that we'll be left behind. We'll not only have poorer quality service but we will just be left out of the economy. So that's been a big part of our agenda in telecommunications. You know the remarkable thing is doing infrastructure planned the right way is not really more expensive then doing it the old-fashioned way.

00:07:49:10 The power of this program with over 800 telecommunications borrowers to be able to create a

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market for equipment design for rural areas we're able to do things in a less expensive manner and doing it the right way is also the most prudent way of doing it.

00:08:10:27 Q: You've been a player at the table as a lot of these decisions have been made. That has not always been the case.

00:08:16:15 A: The remarkable thing about serving in a Clinton/Gore administration has been the amount of cooperation and coordination. The concept that Vice President Gore has talked about a re-inventing government, it wasn't a slogan. It was real, and it included everybody including rural Americans.

00:08:38:15 I was very honored to be able to serve on several task force and working groups that helped us organize our thinking and organize our strategies on telecommunications, on electric restructuring and on the environment. We for example would have regular meetings, coordinated through the Vice President's office, on

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telecommunications.

00:09:03:18 The Rural Utility Service, the National Telecommunications Information Administration, offices within the Department of Commerce, occasionally the Department of State, sometimes the Department of Treasury, would all sit around the table and go through the initiatives that we were working on and making sure that they made sense and that one hand really knew what the other hand was doing.

00:09:25:23 It also created tremendous opportunities for partnerships between agencies. It really is changing the way that government worked. That we all knew government needed to be smaller but it needed to be more efficient. It needed to be coordinated. You couldn't afford to do the same thing two or three times.

00:09:46:14 I think the benefits particularly in the area of telecommunications here as we sit in December of 2000 are pretty extraordinary. The information revolution has

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really drove this economy into place that when I started on Capital Hill working for Senator Eckson on the Senate Budget Committee you never thought was possible.

00:10:12:05 We never thought we could attain this kind of economic growth, this kind of productivity enhancement that would propel the economy to have budget surpluses, to be able to have the highest level of employment in forty years, the highest levels of home ownership in the history of this country.

00:10:30:25 A lot of it has to do with what was created in the telecommunications space with the same kind of coordination and partnership on energy policy and electricity policy. President Clinton and Vice President put forward a bill on electric restructuring which unlike any other legislation that was introduced on that topic was comprehensive and seriously took into account the needs of rural America.

00:11:00:29 I was very happy to be able to be the Department's point

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person, with the able assistance of my now deputy Anthony Haynes, to negotiate with the other departments on that legislation and to be able to explain to them the importance of affordable electricity to the rural economy.

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Same thing goes in our area on water and waste water programs. We've accomplished a tremendous amount of partnership with the environment protection agency, bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service in order to make our water and wastewater program more than just an infrastructure program. But really a health improvement program.

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We had a project which Vice President Gore championed called Water 2000 which from when it was introduced in 1994 and '95 we did 2,000 projects to make safe and clean drinking water available to the over million of Americans who still don't have that quality of life in their community.

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00:12:16:15 It's a very rewarding experience to be able to do that. The theme I guess or the principle is that we worked together. We didn't just have these tight boxes of responsibility. We looked at what we were trying to do. How can we coordinate together to maximize benefits to the good people, the taxpayers and how we could be able to leverage our funds as best as possible. I think that it has again produced some pretty extraordinary benefits.

00:12:53:03 Q: Many of the things you've talked about are quality of life issues that are essential to I guess maintain the interest of families to stay in rural areas and not move to suburbs or cities.

00:13:05:01 A: Absolutely. The importance of these investments in rural communities is not just critical to the quality of life for those citizens, and that really should be enough of a justification for the programs we have here at the Department of Agriculture, but I believe deep in my heart and I believe that the administration feels this way, that these investments in rural America are critical to

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the nation as a whole.

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We are one nation indivisible. Right now you can go to any urban area. You're gonna find that there is a shortage of skilled labor. I challenge you to go to any rural area. You're gonna find some the brightest, the smartest, the most dedicated, the most intelligent people, hardest working people that you can find. By making these kind of investments in rural infrastructure we can help keep the American economy growing, and we can instead of hitting up a wall of limitations in urban areas we can use telecommunications technology.

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We can use affordable power as a way to diversity the rural economy. So I think it's very important not just for the simple pleasures of life--being able to call mom on Mother's Day, being able to have the night lit up with electricity, be able to get clean water when you need it--but also be able to keep this country going because we need to use the genius that exists in rural America in order to keep the economy expanding.

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00:14:50:12 That's the foundation of all of our programs, to make sure that you have that basic infrastructure that allows rural Americans to participate in this economy, and we're seeing it. There's some remarkable things going on. I, just a couple of weeks ago I was with Senator Wellstone (ph.) from Minnesota, and he hosted a roundtable discussion on teleworking.

00:15:14:01 All through Minnesota major industries are bumping up against real difficulties of finding and maintaining skilled workers. Yet rural areas and some of the mining areas in Minnesota have the opposite problem where the farm economy is posing some difficulties, and they need to be able to bring these two needs together.

00:15:38:02 We do that with modern infrastructure. My home state of Nebraska, a town called Binklamin, Nebraska. They happen to have, in (unint.), they happen to have a very high speed connection to the state capital. They were going through difficulties with the farm economy and low

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commodity prices.

00:15:59:24 The community there said, you know, we could be doing information-age kind of work and we've got this connection. So they formed a partnership with the state of Nebraska. So data processing work is being shipped out to Binklamin and shipped back to the state capital, and it's because that infrastructure was there. That's kind of the larger vision we have for our programs is to keep on building and keep on creating those opportunities.

00:16:30:21 Because if it's not there, if you don't have the infrastructure, there's the divide. You hit the wall and you're kind of stuck in the 1950s, and we don't want that.

00:16:40:28 Q: You're agency, The Rural Utilities Service, has provided incentives for communities to develop some of this infrastructure through grant programs especially in telemedicine distance education.

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00:16:52:02 A: Yes.

00:16:52:08 Q: Talk about some of those.

00:16:53:06 A: You know another tremendous legacy that President Clinton and Vice President Gore can feel very good about in 1993 we started making loans and grants under the distance learning telemedicine program, over 350 project all over the United States to connect schools, to create connections between rural health clinics and rural hospitals.

00:17:23:06 It really demonstrates the power of this technology. It's transformed people's lives. In a place called Omaha, Arkansas--now my hometown is Omaha, Nebraska, so it was a real thrill to be in Omaha, Arkansas. We had a distance learning telemedicine project. We called it DLT for distance learning telemedicine.

00:17:44:22 We had a DLT project there. We went to pay a visit, a

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site visit. It was part of a meeting of the Western World Telecommunications Association. You should have seen it. It was just great. They had a teacher there who was a sociology teacher. Now that was a topic. In a small town like Omaha, Arkansas you would never be able to teach a course in sociology.

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She had three people in Omaha. We had three or four people in another neighboring town. Three or four people out in the county. The teacher was able to be connected to students all around the community through the distance learning technology. The same kind of story is replicated over and over again. He also taught a course in economics, another one of those advanced courses that would be very difficult to find a teacher and be able to afford a teacher.

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But if communities can come together and share those costs and share that course work it's something that's very doable. So in Omaha, Arkansas you had as good a quality of education as you could in Omaha, Nebraska, a

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town significantly larger, maybe a hundred times larger than the town or Omaha, Arkansas.

00:19:03:06 In telemedicine there's so many incredible stories. We have a project in North Dakota where a series of senior citizen centers were connected. That created an efficiency for the senior citizen centers, but it also created a remarkable side benefit for the community. There was an example of a young child who had surgery on his ears.

00:19:31:13 So he had I think tubes placed into his ears. They had to go to a town several hundred miles away to actually have the surgery done. But he needed to be checked every week to make sure there wasn't infection. Well, instead of mom and dad having to take off two days from work to drive a couple hundred miles they were able to go to the senior center and hook up through the telemedicine network the scopes and be able to have the child examined in just an hour or so with a doctor several hundred miles away.

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00:20:01:15 At the same senior center they were telling me that the existence of the technology was transforming people's lives. That there was this older gentlemen who spoke Swedish. He spent a lot of time alone. He did speak English, but his native language was Swedish. But since they were connected to the internet he discovered the worldwide web and was able to carry out conversations in his native tongue with people around the world and like came alive.

00:20:34:29 So again, the whole quality of life for him was improved. You just go all over the country on how you can--the power of this technology can make people's lives better. It's just been such a privilege to be able to work in this area. We had this year the biggest program ever in distance learning telemedicine. We're gonna have twenty-five million dollars of grants available and then three hundred million dollars of loans available.

00:21:09:23 So we're very excited. Congress has appreciated that

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program. The lessons we're learning are being replicated all over the country.

00:21:20:26 Q: So how do you think we're doing with the digital divide? Is it less of a divide now?

00:21:25:17 A: It's a challenge. One of the most important parts of understanding the digital divide is that you can't ignore it. As soon as you let up there's a new technology. There's a new opportunity. There really are two rural Americas. I'm pleased to say that the rural America that is on the right side of the divide, if that's an appropriate term, are largely those communities that have an RUS-financed system because we have pushed technology. We have pushed an engineering ethic that makes it possible to provide advanced services.

00:22:10:03 You see some of the most modern equipment in the independent telecommunications companies and co-ops that are part of the RUS family. In those rural communities served by maybe the larger telecommunications companies

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they're not seeing the investment that you see in the independent territories.

00:22:33:16 : Now it's not because the large companies are bad guys or anything. It's their economic necessity that they invest in areas that produce the highest return for their shareholders. Whereas the smaller companies it's their necessity to invest in that community.

00:22:50:05 We have tried to make our program as open as possible to new technologies and to be available in areas where the incumbent provider is just not doing a good job. So that's one of the reforms that I was very proud of that we have put in our telecommunications program so that at least there is an opportunity for those on the wrong side of the divide to be able to come in.

00:23:19:00 There's another area too which is where in the divide where you don't have any service. We can be very, very proud of the record that we developed in the Clinton administration in serving the unserved. Six of the seven

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tribal utilities in the United States are financed by the Rural Utilities Service.

00:23:44:09 I think one of the most profound moments that I have had in this job was to be in a place called Balos (ph.), Arizona with the San Carlos Apache tribe. When the larger telecommunications company was serving that area they had fourteen phones for their community. Mostly along the highway, mostly pay phones.

00:24:04:16 Frequently they would be out of order. So if you were sick, you had difficulties, you had to bring your pickup truck, drive down to the highway and hope that there wasn't someone on the phone and hope that the phone would work. The San Carlos Tribal Utility formed, came to RUS, got a loan. I was able to cut the ribbon so that 450 families in that community got first time phone service.

00:24:33:20 The entire town turned out for this ceremony. It was such a blessing. Folks when they got their phone service were so excited they would fall asleep on the telephone

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talking to each other because of the first time they could call people. Months before the phone service was turned on people were given phone numbers and would be trading phone numbers. They'd say call me when I get a phone.

00:25:00:22 This system in the San Carlos tribe is probably the most modern system in Arizona. Their subscription rate has exceeded their plans. Their quality of life is just dramatically improved. One of the first things they had to do in that town was to hire more police because now people could call 911.

00:25:23:20 So instantly you have a situation where your public safety improves just by having a telephone. Folks could call the doctor in the hospital instead of having to go into the clinic in order to have their questions asked. People would be reluctant because all their friends and neighbors would see them and say oh, what's wrong with you? How come you're not feeling well?

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00:25:45:12 So they could call the doctor and decide whether they needed to come in. So instantly their healthcare dramatically improved. I got to visit with a fellow named Vernon James who was one of the tribal leaders. He came to me and he says you know this is just going so well. Now we're really interested in e-commerce. How can we get into e-commerce?

00:26:09:04 So now there's a whole new area of economic opportunity for that community. The fact is the tribe was able to afford the system. The RUS engineering standards provided a very modern system. So it was just--moments like that are so important to remember that there's still Americans that don't have the modern necessities, the modern conveniences that we who live in Washington, D.C., Omaha, Nebraska, Chicago--we just take it for granted.

00:26:46:02 We just assume that everybody had lights that work and telephones that are on and water that is clean. So I think we're making good progress, but we have to really keep it going. An other area, we have a system in the

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United States called Universal Service Support. It's the way that we as a nation pay for this ubiquitous telecommunications network.

00:27:14:18 It's been part of our telecommunications policy since the Communications Act of 1934. We're going through a period of change and transition with competition being introduced into the telecommunications market. But we-- part of that law that brought the competition also insured that universal service be preserved and advanced.

00:27:38:16 We need to be able to keep that commitment. If we don't then the divide will grow. If we don't it won't be just bad for rural Americans. It will be bad for the entire economy. Because a telephone only has value if it can reach almost everybody in the country or everybody in the world.

00:28:01:29 Once people start falling off the network that telephone, computer, that cell phone, it loses it's value. So it's in everybody's interest to make sure that we're all

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connected. We are on the verge of implementing reforms in universal service support that are gonna be absolutely critical to those 850-so RUS borrowers and to all of rural America.

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I was very lucky to be asked to serve on a group called the Rural Task Force. We were a group of--an advisory committee to the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal State Joint Board which is made up of federal and state regulators. We were asked to provide recommendations on how to reform universal service support for small carriers.

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We just submitted our recommendation earlier this year and the FCC and state regulators are considering those recommendations right now. That decision is gonna have a profound impact on whether we're able to continue this march towards ubiquitous, modern telecommunications for everybody or whether it stalls and the divide grows.

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Q: The internet has offered people in the United States

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access to others all over the world, yet as you point out some of our own citizens can't even access other citizens. So there's two issues. One is access to information and then right with that is the speed of access because the speed of access, though you may have the access, it may be so slow that you can't compete in industrial terms.

00:29:44:14 A: You're absolutely right about that. The real enemy is distance and density. We can overcome that if we design the systems properly. But it's always gonna be a challenge for rural Americans. On average it's three time more expensive to serve rural areas than it is to serve urban areas.

00:30:08:26 But if you get that distance equation right, as we sit here right now the magic number is 18,000 feet. You have to be 18,000 feet from your central office or your digital carrier. If you can get that close and you can design your outside plant to do that then you are gonna be able to participate. You'll be able to get digital

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subscriber line service.

00:30:37:14 Or if you're fortunate to be able to have cable service you can get cable modems. We're very excited that new data services are being rolled out right now that use satellite as a mode of both uplink and down link. So we have the tools to be able to get that speed.

00:31:05:01 I was in the northeast. Met with a company that has-- from Vermont--that does snow mobile parts. They were just a regular old snow mobile--local snow mobile parts store--for the winter tourists. They had a nice little business. But the son, who was very interested in telecommunications, convinced the father, head of the family-owned business, to get on the internet.

00:31:36:17 They partnered up with a cable company. Got connected, got a high speed connection. Got the servers that they needed. Dramatically increased their business. They are now selling snow mobile parts all over the world because when it's warm in Vermont it's cold in Argentina. We had

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quite a business out of it, and the investment is worth it.

00:32:01:15 But it was a challenge. They had to push to be able to get that technology.

00:32:05:24 Q: I remember the times on the farm when an implement broke down and you had to stop what you were doing and go to town and buy the part and it's countless hours were lost. Now, with the internet, if they have the access, they can get on to the internet, go the part and it may even be delivered to them the next morning.

00:32:23:03 A: That's exactly right. So, and the other thing that's just tremendous too is how telecommunications technologies are helping us just with the whole science of farming. We're seeing farmers using global positioning satellite systems in order to figure out how to use the right mixes of fertilizer.

00:32:43:24 We're seeing farmers use the internet to be able to

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access to commodity markets so they could hedge their investments to make sure that they'd be able to make a decent living regardless of what the fates of the weather brings them. But you gotta have that access. You gotta have high speed access or else you're just waiting, waiting, waiting and you're left out.

00:33:11:21 Q: For someone who's observed this whole area for sometime in your career, if you were to look into a crystal ball what do you see? Is it a positive future?

00:33:20:13 A: If we have the commitment and the dedication to continue that vision of the telecommunications act which is a commitment to competition, where competition can be sustained and universal service support to assure that all Americans benefit from this information revolution, the opportunities are limitless.

00:33:45:09 But if we get nervous, if we halt, if we lessen up our commitment and our dedication to that principle of one nation indivisible, to that principle of ubiquitous

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modern phone service. Then we're gonna have a very different kind of country.

00:34:03:25 So I'm optimistic, and I think that the benefits are so obvious that we have no choice but to continue moving forward and making these investments. Same holds true for the electric infrastructure. Rural America is 75% of the landmass of this country. Even though it's only about 25% of the population.

00:34:26:17 You can't have a worldwide information system. You can't have a national power grid. You can't be participants in a modern economy unless the infrastructure in that 75% of the geography is up to date and up to speed. Reliable power is almost as important as high speed connections. It's the shoulders upon which the information revolution stands.

00:34:53:05 That's a very big challenge coming into the future--to make sure that our electric power investments are modern and efficient and up to date. Because reliability of

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power is the difference between whether you can have a modern business or not. One flicker of electricity can beam down on internet service provider or bring down a computer chip manufacturer.

00:35:19:09 So we need very reliable power, and we need reliable transmission and generations largely located in Rural areas. That's been a very rewarding area to be in too.

00:35:31:17 Q: Finally, any special memories that you'll take with you?

00:35:35:22 A: Goodness. I mean there are so many. First and foremost I think it's the high quality, wonderful people that we get to work with here at the Department of Agriculture. The folks at the Rural Utilities Service have never let me down. There's almost no task that we asked of them that could not be done.

00:35:58:04 These folks are just so dedicated. They believe in the mission of our agency as if it were almost a religion.

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They are so committed to our work. That is such a treasure. We're very, very lucky as a nation to be able to have dedicated public servants. I mention my visit to the San Carlos Apache tribe.

00:36:26:24 Another visit that I think I will remember for as long as I live was to be in a place near the Edistal (ph.) river in South Carolina, just outside of Orangeburg which is a booming metropolis. On one side of the Edistal river somehow they were left behind. Thanks to our water, wastewater program, we were able to give folks a modern sewer system.

00:36:53:28 Just this last year I was there with Senator Fritz Holland from South Carolina. Folks still had outhouses. The simple conveniences, the simple things we take for granted, there are parts of America that don't have that. Every time we--new service--it's just such a rewarding thing. So those I think are very, very profound memories.

ORAL HISTORY  
CHRISTOPHER MCLEAN  
ADMINISTRATOR, RURAL UTILITY SERVICE - 12/18/00

00:37:17:14 I'm very grateful to President Clinton for giving me the opportunity to serve in this administration as Deputy Administrator of the Rural Utilities Service and as Administrator. I am so proud of the work of this administration and the things that we've done here at the Department of Agriculture but throughout government.

00:37:37:24 We leave this country a much better place than when we found it.

00:37:42:05 Q: Christopher McLean, Administrator of the Rural Utilities Service, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, thank you for being with us to talk about your tenure as Administrator. I'm Larry Quinn with the Office of Communications at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington.

00:38:00:10

(END OF TAPE)