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BPA, PUDs agree to use fiber optics for public utility, community purposes

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Bonneville Power Administration

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Portland, Ore. – Small Towns and communities across the state of Washington will have access to the information superhighway thanks to an agreement announced today. The Bonneville Power Administration and the Washington Public Utility Districts Association signed an agreement to make fiber optic cables available to public and private entities and the communities they serve.

Greg Marney, director of telecommunications for WPUDA, said the network is expected to be running by early 2000 with interconnection points in every county where BPA fiber now runs, within two years. The network will provide access to telecommunication transport between the entities while individual members will operate the network within their own services areas.

"This agreement will bring the information superhighway to rural areas," said Jack Robertson, former BPA deputy administrator. "We are offering special access to anyone who will provide services to those areas at a reasonable cost. Washington PUD Association is the first in Washington to step up to provide this service."

"These lines will enhance utility operations, but we're also pleased to be working with Bonneville to open up available lines to our communities," said Don Godard, manager of Grant County PUD and chairperson of a committee overseeing development of the public telecommunications network. "Many PUDs and other utilities serve communities that currently do not have high speed telecommunication facilities."

WPUDA represents the 28 PUDs that provide electricity and water service in Washington. The association is organizing a nonprofit corporation to set up and operate the network. Sixteen PUDs will belong to the organization initially. Other utilities and other entities may join in the future.

The utilities will use the network for utility purposes and plan to make excess capacity available to other organizations, including schools, hospitals, emergency services, museums, libraries, businesses that contribute to rural economic development, and federal, state, local and tribal governments. The utilities

intend to provide open access to the network at nondiscriminatory, nonprofit, cost-based rates.

Rural communities are not economically attractive to most local and long haul telecommunications companies because of the low population densities and remoteness of connections. Rates can be four times higher than that for urban areas. But end user costs for rural and remote areas served by the agreement will be roughly comparable to those paid by end users in larger communities in the Northwest. BPA's rates for the public benefits fiber program fully recover BPA's costs to install and operate.

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