



Fiber Broadband Speeds Trade for Small Town Agricultural Business

Every few minutes, the numbers on Gary Smith’s computer screen flicker and change. Outside his office window in Lovington, Illinois (population 1,100) are fourteen grain bins, an elevator, and a dryer, with a total storage capacity of 3.5 million bushels. As the Operations Manager, Smith relies on the three computers in his office to track prices, make bids, run reports, and monitor the levels of the grain elevators in the Okaw Grain Farmers Cooperative (Okaw) storage system. For decades, these computers have depended on a copper digital subscriber loop, commonly known as DSL, a technology that is becoming outdated faster than the data can download. The speed at which the numbers are conveyed between Lovington and the Chicago Board of Trade, one of the nation’s largest agricultural commodity exchanges, can mean significant profits or heartbreaking losses for this rural business. Smith says, “If there’s a delay, we’re losing money.” Okaw’s not the only one sustaining this loss, so are the 300 rural farmers that comprise its membership.



Operations Manager Gary Smith demonstrates how he depends on high speed Internet to connect local farmers to the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), a major commodity exchange and futures market. In recent years, CBOT has shifted to electronic trading.

However, Smith isn’t worried. In the agricultural marketplace, where milliseconds can mean thousands of dollars are lost or made, Okaw will now receive information on grain prices and be able to submit bids instantly. Early in 2017, the Moultrie Independent Telephone Company (MITCO), Lovington’s long-standing business, received a \$4 million award from USDA’s Rural Utilities Service Telecommunications Infrastructure Loan Program. This loan provided funding for a comprehensive network upgrade in Lovington, which includes new fiber to the home access for 800 premises. From existing DSL wire to leading edge fiber technology, MITCO now provides its customers with access to tenfold higher speeds at deals comparable to the prices customers already pay.

With the next harvest around the corner, this upgrade comes at a pivotal moment for Smith and Okaw. Recognizing the urgency and universal need for competitive telecommunications, Smith reminds us all, “Optic fiber, whether it helps one or 100, is needed.”

Obligation Amount: \$4,000,000 Infrastructure Loan

Date of Obligation: January 2017

Congressional District: Representative Shimkus, District 15; Senators Durbin and Duckworth

Partners: Moultrie Independent Telephone Company (parent company: Shawnee Communications)

Demographics: Lovington, IL ; population 1,100

Impact: This project funded the network upgrade of the Lovington exchange. On the new fiber system, businesses and residences will experience speeds upgraded tenfold and perhaps higher in the future -- a significant improvement from the former 10 Mbps service over copper.