



UPCOUNTRY FIBER TO BRING BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS TO UPSTATE RURAL SOUTH CAROLINA

Partnership between Blue Ridge Electric Co-op and WCFIBER invests more than \$150 million to help to bridge the “digital divide”

Pickens, SC - May 18, 2021 – Utility cooperatives [Blue Ridge Electric Co-op](#) (BREC) and [WCFIBER](#) announced today that they have partnered to create [Upcountry Fiber](#), an internet service provider that will bring fiber optic, high-speed broadband internet access to households and businesses in BREC’s service area to help bridge the “digital divide” where little to no access exists.

With more than 1,800 square miles to cover, the \$150 million expansion will be broken into multiple projects, forecasting an approximate five-year rollout in in both rural and suburban areas of Pickens, Oconee, Anderson, Northern Greenville and Northern Spartanburg counties. Approximately 250,000 people will benefit from this new service from their homes, places of business or schools.

One of the first pilot projects was completed in February 2021 in Oconee County’s Stillwater neighborhood. 85 of the 130 homes participated in the pilot, which allowed Upcountry Fiber to test and refine the service. Upcountry Fiber plans to continue to build out in parts of Seneca and Central and will work its way outward through the end of 2021.

Together, the cooperatives will share costs and responsibilities of the rollout, maintenance and service for Upcountry Fiber. BREC will use its existing utility poles and infrastructure to build the network, while WCFIBER will be responsible for connecting fiber from the poles directly to each customer’s location, as well as for the equipment inside households and businesses. Upcountry Fiber will bill for these services independently.

“This partnership creates a game-changing opportunity for Blue Ridge Electric members,” said Jeff Wilson, chief executive officer, WCFIBER. “Fiber optic broadband is the fastest, most reliable network available anywhere, and we are proud to be able to offer it to so many who currently have no access to it.”

“The digital divide is a community-wide problem that both WCFIBER and Blue Ridge are solving together,” said Jim Lovinggood, chief executive officer, BREC. “Without access to high-speed, reliable internet, communities are losing ground. With it, the Upstate’s rural communities have a better chance to become stronger by having a more attractive economic development story, easier access to information for students to learn, educators to teach, and for our neighbors to be better able to apply for jobs, have better access to healthcare by being able to virtually meet with their doctors, if needed. The entertainment options now available are a bonus.”

For more information and to register your interest in receiving Upcountry Fiber high-speed internet service to your home or business, go to www.UpcountryFiber.com.

Background Facts:

- According to the [United States Department of Agriculture's](#) website, "80 percent of the 24 million American households that do not have reliable, affordable high-speed internet are in rural areas."
- SC General Assembly approved legislation that signaled its support for improving access to broadband, with the provision allowing electric suppliers like BREC to use existing power lines and easements to accommodate the extension of fiber cable.
 - Helps to hold down expenses and facilitate taking fiber into every home or business served by a cooperative.
- BREC conducted a two-year feasibility study to determine bringing fiber to its members.
 - More than 27,000 people were identified as unserved or underserved.
 - COVID-19 amplified this divide tenfold.

Upcountry Fiber Facts:

- Partnership between BREC and WCFIBER was formally established in Fall 2020.
- Project is financed in part by a loan from the USDA's Rural Utilities Service, which provides much-needed infrastructure or infrastructure improvements to rural communities, including telecommunications, which help to expand economic opportunities and improve the quality of life for rural residents.
- Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative, the fourth largest co-op in the state, serves more than 69,000 members, reaching approximately a quarter of a million people, in Pickens, Oconee, Anderson, Greenville and Spartanburg counties with more than 7,100 miles of line over 1,800 square miles.
- WCFIBER serves more than 24,000 subscribers in Abbeville, Anderson, Greenwood, McCormick and Newberry counties in South Carolina and also Columbia County in Georgia.
- Upcountry Fiber will serve both suburban and rural areas of Pickens, Oconee, Anderson, Greenville and Spartanburg counties (BREC's service area).

ABOUT UPCOUNTRY FIBER

Upcountry Fiber is a high-speed fiber internet provider to the five counties of Anderson, Greenville, Oconee, Pickens, and Spartanburg. Established in Fall 2020, Upcountry Fiber is the product of a partnership between Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative and WCFIBER. Founded by organizations created to electrify and connect rural areas of South Carolina; decades later, Upcountry Fiber's mission is to bridge the digital divide. Offering symmetrical internet speeds up to 1 Gbps over a fiber network, Upcountry Fiber has the fastest and most reliable high-speed internet in the area. To learn more about Upcountry Fiber, visit us at www.UpcountryFiber.com.

ABOUT BLUE RIDGE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

Blue Ridge Electric Cooperative, Inc., established in 1940, is a member-owned, not-for-profit electric distribution utility that services more than 69,000 members in the Upstate of South Carolina. The cooperative supplies electric service in Anderson, Greenville, Oconee, Pickens, and Spartanburg counties. Blue Ridge started operations with 1,680 members inherited from the South Carolina Rural Electrification Authority, which was formed more than 80 years ago with the specific task of electrifying the state's rural areas.

ABOUT WCFIBER

The West Carolina Tel family of companies, including WCTEL and WCFIBER, combine a tradition of service with the best technology available. Friendly, community-minded employees are committed to building a fiber network that is ready for whatever the future of technology may hold. The fiber optic network provides wireline and wireless voice, data, video, security, and hosted business services in a four-county area in South Carolina and to neighboring Greenwood, SC, Newberry, SC, and Columbia County, GA. To find out more about WCFIBER go to www.wcfiber.net. WCFIBER is designated as a nationally Certified Gig-Capable Provider by NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association.

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