Strengthening Rural Communities
Thursday, Aug. 2 | 9:45 am-12:00 pm

Speaker Biographies

Michael J. Santorelli
Director, Advanced Communications Law & Policy Institute
New York Law School

Michael Santorelli is a Director of the Advanced Communications Law & Policy Institute (ACLP) at New York Law School. In that capacity, he oversees the ACLP’s research and analysis of the legal, regulatory and public policy issues impacting broadband connectivity.

Michael regularly serves as a resource to federal, state, and local policymakers regarding broadband planning. He is currently a member of the FCC’s Removing State and Local Regulatory Barriers to Broadband Deployment Working Group, which works with the Commission’s Broadband Deployment Advisory Committee (BDAC). Michael has served on the New York State Broadband Task Force and on similar initiatives in New York City, including as an organizer of the Digital Equity, Adoption & Literacy (DEAL) Coalition. Immediately prior to joining the ACLP, Michael was the lead staffer for the New York City Council’s Committee on Technology.

Michael received his undergraduate degree, with honors, from Tufts University, and his law degree, with honors, from New York Law School.

Chris Mehl
Policy Director
Headwaters Economics
Bozeman, MT

Chris is the Policy Director at Headwaters Economics and has extensive experience working in communications and on public policy issues across the nation and the West. He also serves as the Deputy Mayor and is the incoming Mayor of Bozeman, MT. Chris has been at Headwaters Economics for the past the years and previously worked as Press Secretary for several Members of the U.S. House of Representatives.
Anne Hazlett serves as the Assistant to the Secretary for Rural Development at the United States Department of Agriculture. An Indiana native, she has a deep and lifelong passion for rural America, small towns and the people who call them home.

Anne has worked on agriculture and rural issues for over fifteen years. Serving as legal counsel for the Agriculture Committees in both the U.S. House and Senate, Anne has been an advocate for rural communities on many issues important to rural America from Farm Bill legislation to broadband and nutrition programs.

In addition to her service on Capitol Hill, Anne also served as Director of Agriculture for her home state of Indiana and Chief of Staff for Indiana Lt. Governor Becky Skillman. In these key leadership roles, she worked to ensure that Indiana’s agriculture industry and rural business sector were a significant part of the state’s economic revitalization.

At USDA, Anne is leading the Rural Development mission area to create an environment for rural prosperity, from greater access to broadband connectivity and medical care to workforce training through distance learning. In this work, she is particularly passionate about helping families and community leaders touched by the opioid epidemic find hope and partnership in building a brighter future.

Hazlett is a graduate of Kansas State University and the Indiana University School of Law. She also holds a master’s degree in agricultural law from the University of Arkansas.

P.J. Huffstutter
Staff Writer
Thomson Reuters
Chicago, IL
P.J. Huffstutter is a commodities reporter with a specialty of enterprise, investigative journalism stories. The vast majority of her stories deal with U.S. commodity crops and the livestock industry. After graduating from the University of California, San Diego, with a degree in psychology, she worked at newspapers in Colorado and California as a general assignment reporter. In 1997, Huffstutter joined the Los Angeles Times as a business reporter covering the agriculture industry in the Midwest and California. Since 2010 she has worked for Thomson Reuters out of their Chicago Office.

Senator Jerry Sonnenberg  
Colorado State Senate  
Sterling, CO

Senator Jerry Sonnenberg represents Colorado Senate District 1 in northeastern Colorado. He was a substitute teacher at Sterling schools as well as a part time instructor in the Farm Business Management department at Northeastern Junior College for two years. He served as Chairman for the Colorado preschool pilot program and was a member of the Sterling Schools Building Accountability Committee.

Senator Sonnenberg is a Colorado native who has been farming and ranching his entire life. He grew up in Sterling, Colorado, graduated from Sterling High School, and attended Northeastern Junior College. Before serving in the state senate he was on the Colorado Farm Bureau Board of Directors, the Republican River Conservation District Board of Directors, and on Colorado Water Congress Policy Committee. He also served as President of the Coloradans for Conservation and Development. As a President of the Colorado Agricultural Leadership Program, Senator Sonnenberg is a dedicated advocate for the Colorado agricultural community.

Senator Elaine Bowers  
Kansas State Senate  
Concordia, KS

Senator Elaine Bowers represents Kansas State Senate District 20 in northeastern Kansas. Bowers is a third generation farmer and farmer is the daughter of a long-time Kansas senator, John Bowers. Bowers is a co-founder of the Kansas Chapter of the National Farmers Union. She is a member of the National Farmers Union Board. In 2010, she was appointed to serve as Senate Majority Leader by Kansas Governor Sam Brownback.
Elaine Bowers was raised on a farm in Ottawa County, Kansas. She attended school in the Delphos and Minneapolis school district and then Cloud County Community College in Concordia. Elaine is a small business owner in Concordia; along with her husband she runs a local car dealership.

As a life-long resident of north central Kansas, Elaine puts her business experience to work on issues such as education, fiscal responsibility and agriculture.

Senator Benny Shendo, Jr.
New Mexico State Senate
Jemez Pueblo, NM

Benny Shendo has represented the 22 District since 2012. He is a business consultant who formerly served as the secretary of the Department of Indian Affairs for Governor Bill Richardson. Prior to the legislature he served as the 1st Lt. Governor, Pueblo of Jemez and co-founded the Diego Riverside Charter School, Jemez Pueblo, 1999.

He is a graduate of the College of Law, University of Colorado Boulder, 1988-89, and received his Bachelor of Science in Business, University of Colorado, 1987.

Martha Wigton
Director, Budget and Research Office
Georgia State Legislature
Atlanta, GA

Martha Wigton, Director of the House Budget and Research Office. Martha Wigton has worked for the General Assembly for more than 25 years. She was appointed Director of the House Budget & Research Office in 2011 after having served as Deputy Director for six years. Wigton has a bachelor’s degree from Georgia Southern University and completed post graduate studies at the University of North Florida.