

PSC DEPARTMENT DIGEST

Nebraska Public Service Commission
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PSC REDISTRIBUTES NUSF SUPPORT THROUGH REVERSE AUCTION

The Nebraska Public Service Commission has awarded nearly \$21 million to winning bidders for broadband buildout to more than 1,100 unserved Nebraska households as a result of its 2024 Reverse Auction in docket NUSF-131.

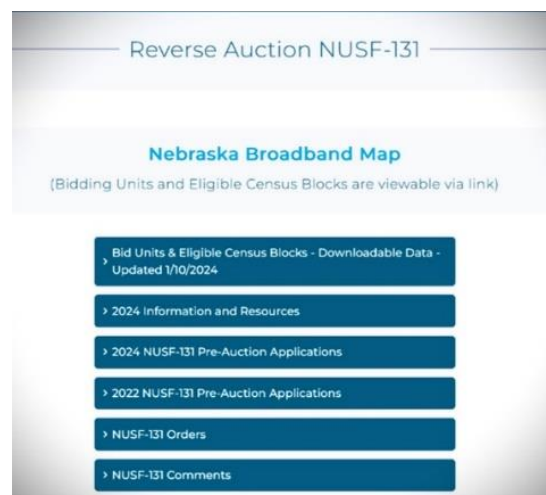
The 2024 reverse auction was designed to provide broadband capable voice service to rural areas where telecommunication carriers Frontier and Windstream have traditionally provided only voice service by redistributing Nebraska Universal Service Fund (NUSF) support that was either unused or withheld in rural Nebraska.

"We are very excited about the results of this iteration of the reverse auction," said Cullen Robbins, Director Telecommunications/NUSF Dept.

Bidding in the reverse auction began on January 22 with the final round held on March 11. Four entities were ultimately awarded bids in the reverse auction. The winning bidders consisted of Great Plains Communications, the Hamilton Consortium, Midstates Communications and Pinpoint Communications.

The PSC awarded \$5,726,880 of an available \$5,845,893 in support for Windstream areas and \$15,235,366 of an available \$15,996,054.50 for Frontier areas.

More detail on the areas that were awarded bids can be found on the Commission's broadband map at < <https://broadbandmap.nebraska.gov> >.



PSC to Award 2023-2024 Precision Ag Infrastructure Grants

A total of 20 applications were received by the PSC as it reviews grant applications and prepares to award grants for the 2023-2024 Precision Agriculture Infrastructure Grant (PRO-AG) program.

Created by the legislature, during the 2022 session, the Precision Agriculture Grant Act, in Neb. Rev. Stat. §86-1401-86-1406, paves the way for the awarding of nearly one million dollars in grants to accelerate rural economic development by helping to provide high speed internet service to farm sites in unserved areas of Nebraska.

The PRO-AG program is divided into two distinct subprograms, Connectivity and Devices and Technology. Available funding for the 2023-2024 fiscal year of \$906,478 will be divided equally among the two subprograms with \$453,239 available for each subprogram.

Of the 20 applications received, six were for the Connectivity subprogram and 14 were for the Devices and technology subprogram. Grant awards are scheduled to be announced by the Commission in April.



Commission Chair Appointed to FCC Task Force on Precision Ag

Nebraska Public Service Commission Chair Dan Watermeier (District 1) has been appointed to serve on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Task Force for Reviewing the Connectivity and Technology Needs of Precision Agriculture.

Established in consultation with the Secretary of Agriculture, the Task Force is the federal advisory committee established to provide advice and recommendations to the FCC on how to assess and advance deployment of broadband internet access service on unserved agricultural land in order to promote precision agriculture.

The Task Force will look at how connectivity can improve sustainability in agriculture production and increase the adoption of precision agriculture.

Commissioner Watermeier's term on the Task Force will be for one-year ending on January 1, 2025.



Commissioner Dan Watermeier, Dist.1

Second Round of Capital Projects Fund Grants Underway

A second round of Capital Project Fund (CPF) grants for projects falling within the 3rd Congressional District is underway.

The additional round is designed to utilize \$24.3 million in funds that were not awarded during the initial round of CPF grants in 2023.

The PSC received 59 applications for the remaining funding. Applications were due in January. The Commission will now review the applications and any challenges received before determining the number of submissions that will be funded.

CPF grants are statutorily required to be awarded in Congressional Districts One and Three. At least \$40 million in grant funding was available in each congressional district for eligible broadband projects.

Over \$40 million was awarded to projects in District 1 during the first grant cycle, so the second grant cycle will focus on the 3rd Congressional District.

Commissioner Schram Re-Appointed Chair of NARUC Committee on Telecommunications

Commissioner Tim Schram (District 3) has been re-appointed to serve as the Chair of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) Committee on Telecommunications.

A long-standing member of the NARUC Committee on Telecommunications, Commissioner Schram served a number of years as vice-chair of the committee before assuming the role of chairman in the spring of 2023. NARUC Committee chairs are appointed on an annual basis.

During this year's NARUC Winter Policy Summit in Washington D.C. a resolution by the Committee on Telecommunications, was passed by the NARUC Board of Directors. The Resolution encouraged the FCC to stop robocalling and improve efficiency through updated guidance to help states deal with cases of telephone number mismanagement using the FCC's audit process.



Commissioner Tim Schram, Dist. 3

Public Advocate Hired for Natural Gas Department

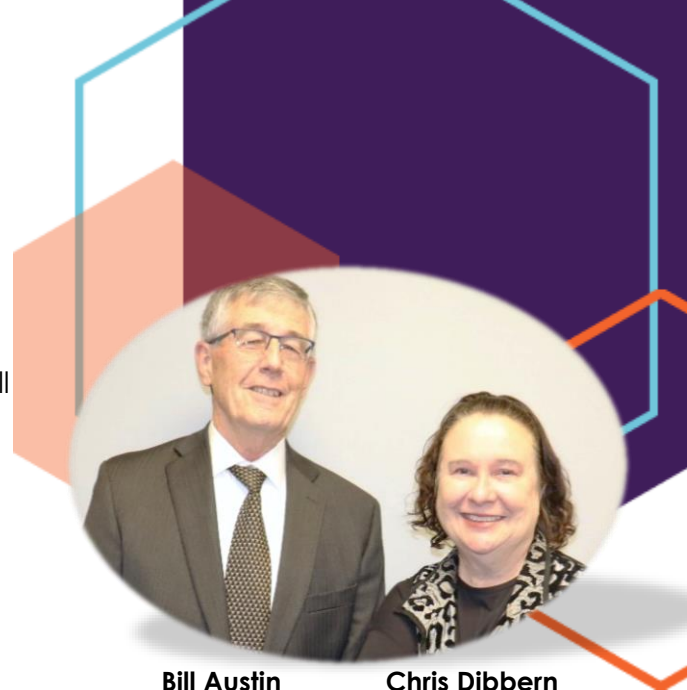
Lincoln attorney Chris Dibbern has joined the Commission as its new Public Advocate for Natural Gas.

Dibbern replaces longtime PSC Public Advocate Attorney Bill Austin who retired at the end of 2023.

“Bill was a consummate professional and will be greatly missed,” said PSC Executive Director Tom Golden. “At the same time, we feel extremely fortunate to be able to bring someone with Chris’ knowledge and expertise on board.”

Dibbern, is an experienced General Counsel having spent 32-years with Nebraska Municipal Power Pool (NMPP) Energy. With expertise in energy and business law across the Midwest, she is an accomplished lobbyist in public utilities.

Created by statute, Neb. Rev. Stat. § 66-1830, the Public Advocate (PA) position was designed to be a separate and independent division representing the interests of Nebraska citizens and natural gas jurisdictional utility ratepayers in matters regarding utilities. Read more about the [PA position](#) on the Natural Gas page of the PSC website.



Bill Austin

Chris Dibbern

PSC Welcomes New Legal Counsel

Sara Hulac is the newest member of the Public Service Commissions legal team and will be working primarily with the State 911 Department.

An attorney for 15-years, she is a graduate of the University of Nebraska College of law and holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Creighton University. Sara comes to the PSC from her most recent position at the Nebraska State Patrol.

Raised in Omaha, she has lived in Lincoln for the past six years. Sara enjoys reading, hiking, plants, and crochet. She has two rambunctious dogs and two mischievous cats keeping her busy.



Sara Hulac-Legal Counsel

FRA's State Rail Safety Participation Program

Established by the 1970 Railroad Safety Act, the Federal Railroad Safety Administration's (FRA), State Rail Safety Participation program allows state inspectors to be certified by the FRA to assure the application and interpretation of federal rail safety rules, regulations, orders, and standards.

Before a state can participate in the federal program it must enter into an agreement with the FRA for authority in one of six certified disciplines. Those disciplines include:

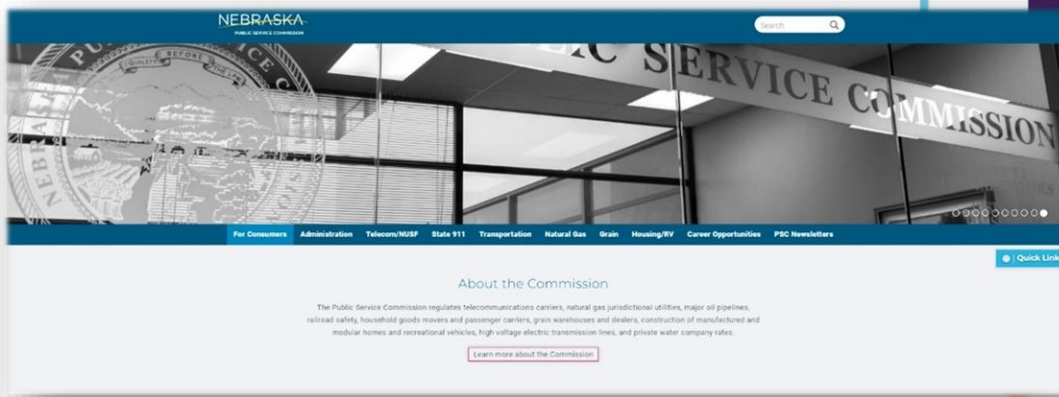
- Track
- Operating Practices
- Motive Power & Equipment (MP&E)
- Hazardous Material
- Signal and Train Control
- Grade Crossing and Trespass Outreach

Nebraska joined the [State Rail Safety Participation program](#) in 1994 and is one of 32 states that has entered into an agreement with the FRA. Through participation in the FRA program, state inspectors serve to supplement the number of safety inspections that occur in Nebraska.

Under the agreement with the FRA the Nebraska Public Service Commission, has the ability to conduct supplemental safety inspections with an FRA certified state Motor Power & Equipment (MP&E) inspector and a Track inspector. The Commission's MP&E inspector is currently in training with the FRA. With the passage of LB1412 funding has been appropriated to the Commission for the hiring of a track inspector.

The state program exists solely to support the FRA in its duties and the Commission through its Rail Safety Program works to coordinate state inspections with the FRA.





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The Nebraska Public Service Commission regulates telecommunications carriers, natural gas jurisdictional utilities, major oil pipelines, railroad safety, household goods movers and passenger carriers, grain warehouses and dealers, construction of manufactured and modular homes and recreation vehicles, high voltage electric transmission lines, and private water company rates.

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