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Feds give environmental OK to Massachusetts broadband plan

By Ben Storrow

NORTHAMPTON - An initiative aimed at bringing high-speed Internet to western Massachusetts received a federal stamp of approval today, as the National Telecommunications and Information Administration approved an environmental assessment for the MassBroadband123 network.

The federal approval was necessary before work could begin stringing the 1,338 miles of fiber-optic cable needed to bring broadband Internet to rural Massachusetts. MassBroadband123 will complete what is known as the "middle mile," stringing cable to anchor institutions in town centers.

"This is an important milestone in moving the MassBroadband123 project forward and reaching Gov. Patrick's goal of broadband connectivity in the region," Mass Broadband Institute Director Judith Dumont said in a statement. "We're making great progress toward bridging the digital divide."

The project involves stringing cable from 30,000 existing utility poles throughout western and central Massachusetts. The federal government looked at the project's potential impact on water and quality, geology and soil, and land use, ultimately concluding it will have no significant environmental affect on the region.

The network will connect more than 120 communities in western and north central Massachusetts. It is funded by \$45.4 million in federal stimulus money and \$26.2 million in state funds.