By Senator Bernard

1   A bill to be entitled

2   An act relating to high-speed broadband development

3   incentives; creating s. 288.9964, F.S.; providing a

4   short title; providing legislative findings; defining

5   terms; creating a state-funded grant program within

6   the Florida Office of Broadband; providing a purpose

7   for the program; providing eligibility criteria;

8   requiring the office to give funding priority to

9   specified partnerships and organizations; specifying

10   limits on annual funding; requiring funding recipients

11   to provide annual progress reports containing

12   specified information; requiring the office to conduct

13   performance audits; authorizing farmers in underserved

14   farming communities to receive specified tax credits

15   if certain conditions are met; specifying projects

16   eligible for tax credits; requiring the office to

17   conduct specified public awareness campaigns and

18   provide technical training programs; providing an

19   expiration date; providing an effective date.

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21   Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

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23   Section 1. Section 288.9964, Florida Statutes, is created

24   to read:

25   288.9964 Rural connectivity.—

26   (1) This section may be cited as the "Rural Connectivity

27   Innovation Act."

28   (2) The Legislature finds that:

29   (a) Access to high-speed broadband Internet service is

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30 | essential for modern agricultural operations as well as rural
31 | economic development.
32 | (b) Underserved farming communities face significant
33 | challenges due to limited access to broadband Internet service.
34 | (c) Public-private partnerships and targeted incentives can
35 | drive innovation and improve connectivity in rural areas.
36 | (3) For purposes of this section, the term:
37 | (a) "Broadband-enabled technologies" means digital tools
38 | and systems used in agriculture, including precision farming,
39 | smart irrigation, and automated machinery.
40 | (b) "Eligible applicant" means a public-private
41 | partnership, a local government, or a cooperative organization
42 | that proposes a broadband infrastructure project, which may
43 | include broadband-enabled technologies.
44 | (c) "Underserved farming community" means a rural farming
45 | area with limited or no access to high-speed broadband Internet
46 | services.
47 | (4)(a) There is created within the Florida Office of
48 | Broadband a state-funded grant program. The purpose of the grant
49 | program is to fund broadband infrastructure projects in
50 | underserved communities, including underserved farming
51 | communities.
52 | 1. To be eligible to receive grant funds, an applicant must
53 | demonstrate a commitment to serving underserved communities and
54 | must outline a plan for maintaining existing infrastructure.
55 | 2. The office must give funding priority to public-private
56 | partnerships and cooperative organizations.
57 | 3. Total funding for the grant program may not exceed $50
58 | million annually.

CODING: Words ~~stricken~~ are deletions; words underlined are additions.

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59   (b) Recipients under the state-funded grant program must
60   submit annual progress reports detailing project milestones,
61   expenditures, and broadband access improvements.
62   (c) The office must conduct performance audits to ensure
63   funds are used effectively and equitably.
64   (5)(a) A farmer in an underserved farming community who
65   purchases, installs, or maintains broadband-enabled technologies
66   may receive state tax credits of up to $10,000 annually.
67   (b) Eligible expenses for tax credits include the purchase,
68   installation, and maintenance of broadband-enabled technologies.
69   (6) The office must:
70   (a) Conduct public awareness campaigns to inform rural
71   communities about grant opportunities and inform farmers in
72   underserved farming communities about the tax credits.
73   (b) Provide technical training programs to help farmers
74   adopt and use broadband-enabled technologies.
75   (7) This section shall remain in effect until December 31,
76   2030, unless extended or amended by the Legislature.
77   Section 2. This act shall take effect July 1, 2025.