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## **Fiber-optic cable project will bring high-speed Internet to rural areas**

Aug 27, 2011 (Lewiston Tribune - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- Contractors recently began laying 170 miles of fiber-optic cable across Whitman County, as part of a \$14 million network that will bring high-speed Internet access to rural communities throughout the region.

The project is spearheaded by the Port of Whitman, which serves as the lead economic development agency for Whitman County. The fiber-optic network will run from the Port of Wilma to Spokane, passing through Colton, Uniontown and Pullman, then north along Highway 27 through Palouse, Garfield, Oakesdale and Rosalia. A secondary spur will extend from Pullman through Albion to Colfax.

Debbie Snell, the port's properties and development manager, said many of these locations already have Internet access. However, the number of providers and available bandwidth may be limited.

"This will be an open-access network that should increase competition and probably push prices down," she said. "What I've told communities is that, in the future, they'll have this tool to help them recruit potential businesses." Once the network is completed this winter, the port will begin leasing broadband capacity to various public and private telecommunications providers. The end-users will range from schools and libraries to medical clinics, businesses and homes.

Most of the funding for the project comes from a \$12 million federal stimulus grant. The port is contributing \$1.8 million.

This is just one segment of a \$185 million statewide expansion of the Northwest Open Access Network, or Noanet, a nonprofit telecommunications wholesaler formed by 12 public utility districts in 2000.

Noanet currently operates 1,800 miles of fiber-optic lines around the state, serving about 260,000 customers. The expansion will add about 800 miles over the next three years as regional segments like the Port of Wilma-Spokane route come online.

Local entities are contributing \$45 million towards the expansion; that's being matched with \$140 million in stimulus funding. The overall effort is being likened to the rural electrification work that took place in the 1930s and '40s; the basic goal is to ensure that rural communities have access to the high-speed telecommunications services needed to participate in the modern economy.

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