

Date of Hearing: January 18, 2024

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Chris Holden, Chair

AB 415 (Rodriguez) – As Amended April 11, 2023

Policy Committee:	Emergency Management	Vote:	7 - 0
	Communications and Conveyance		13 - 0

Urgency: No State Mandated Local Program: No Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill enacts, upon appropriation by the Legislature, the Emergency Fairgrounds Communications Grant Act.

Specifically, this bill:

- 1) Requires, by January 1, 2025, upon appropriation by the Legislature, the Office of Emergency Services (OES) to establish a grant program to provide fairgrounds with funding to build and upgrade communication and internet infrastructure. OES must establish standards to award grant funds based on such a fairground's need for internet capabilities to service an emergency response operation.
- 2) Requires OES to consult with the Department of Technology (CDT) and Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) to coordinate the statewide building and upgrading of communication and internet infrastructure on fairgrounds.

FISCAL EFFECT:

- 1) General Fund (GF) or California Advanced Services Fund (CASF) cost pressure in the tens of millions to hundreds of millions of dollars, ultimately dependent on the amount of any appropriation made by the Legislature to OES for the grant program. The author previously requested a \$125 million GF appropriation for this purpose in the 2022-23 state budget.

OES notes it would utilize 5% of allocated program funds for administrative costs, which include ongoing staff positions to develop grant program criteria and select awardees.

- 2) Likely minor and absorbable costs to CDT and CDFA to consult with OES on infrastructure needs. However, if a substantial appropriation is made to OES for the grant program, CDT or CDFA may need an additional staff position to consult on a larger-scale program, resulting in annual costs of approximately \$150,000 to each agency for the duration of the program.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

Despite how often fairgrounds serve as a site for emergency response operations, many are woefully unequipped to do so when it comes to high-speed internet capabilities. During disasters, victims, first

responders, and public safety personnel reply on social media, email, calls, and video calls for communication and up-to-date information.

This bill is supported by the California Farm Bureau Federation and local government associations.

2) **Background.**

Evolving Use of Fairgrounds. Fairgrounds are perceived primarily as sites for annual fairs and agricultural events, but in the last two decades, California fairgrounds have met new demands during disasters, serving as sites for heating and cooling centers during extreme weather events, vaccination clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic, and public support during terrorism threats. Fairgrounds also played a critical role during recent major wildfire disasters. For example, during and after the 2018 Camp Fire, the Butte, Glenn, and Yuba county fairgrounds were used as staging areas for emergency services and shelters for both people and animals. However, a 2020 assessment for OES conducted by the California State University, Chico, estimated costs of upgrades to broadband service capacity “necessary to establish sufficient communication infrastructure” at California’s 74 fairgrounds that can be activated for emergency response to be approximately \$31 million to \$124 million.

Mandating and Funding Broadband Access. Beginning in 2018, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) adopted the first of a series of decisions regarding emergency consumer protections, communications resiliency, and emergency response duties of telecommunications providers. The first decision required wireless telephone corporations to take steps to ensure the availability of reliable cell service during an emergency.

State law directs the CPUC to develop, implement, and administer the CASF to encourage deployment of high-quality advanced communications services for all Californians that will promote economic growth, job creation, and the substantial social benefits of advanced information and communications technologies. SB 4 (Gonzalez), Chapter 671, Statutes of 2021, modified the CASF program, including authorizing the CPUC to increase the annual surcharge collection cap and authorizing CASF funds to be used for projects deploying broadband infrastructure to unserved non-residential facilities used for local and state emergency response activities, including fairgrounds.

This bill creates a new, separate grant program to provide fairs with funding to build and upgrade on-site communication and internet infrastructure. The Assembly Communications & Conveyance Committee’s analysis of this bill notes that while creating a new broadband deployment program “would not directly hinder existing broadband deployment efforts, the state’s resources are not unlimited” and “any funding invested in a broadband program for fairgrounds means there is less money available for other purposes, like connecting households to broadband.”

- 3) **Prior Legislation.** AB 1934 (Rodriguez), of the 2021-22 Legislative Session, was substantively similar to this bill, except AB 1934 specified an intended appropriation of \$125 million and specified minimum standards for a fairground receiving grant funds. AB 1934 was held on this committee’s suspense file.