



Minnesota Professional Fire Fighters

8100 Wayzata Blvd, St Louis Park, MN 55426

March 14, 2025

Chair Torkelson, Lead Stephenson, and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee,

On behalf of Minnesota's 2,000 professional firefighters, I am writing to urge you to oppose provisions of the omnibus agriculture bill that weaken safety standards for broadband installation.

The Minnesota Professional Fire Fighters Association is proud to be the voice of Minnesota's 2,000 Professional Fire Fighters. We are committed to serving our members and making Minnesota safer to live, work, and raise a family. Every day, our members report for duty committed to providing excellence in public safety to the communities we serve.

The broadband worker and infrastructure safety provisions passed by the Legislature in 2024 support the development of a skilled local workforce and hold broadband providers accountable for unsafe construction practices that jeopardize existing utility infrastructure and public and firefighter safety. Broadband installation-related line strikes can have devastating consequences. In 1998, a crew installing broadband cable for high-speed internet in downtown Saint Cloud struck a gas line. The resulting explosion killed four people, destroyed six buildings, and caused \$400,000 in damage. In 2018, a broadband installation-related line strike in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, led to the death of a volunteer firefighter. In 2023, broadband installation contractors severed the main and backup lines supporting Nebraska's 911 call system, leading to the loss of 911 access for 60 percent of Nebraska's residents for 12 hours.

Telecommunications installation is a leading cause of damage to underground utilities in Minnesota. When telecommunications installation operations hit underground infrastructure, including natural gas and electric lines, they threaten public safety – especially when the damage is not immediately reported. For example, the City of Bloomington recently reported that a fiber installer hit a gas line, patched it with duct tape, and reburied it – putting residents at risk.

With investment in broadband expected to grow significantly over the next five years, the Legislature is responsible for ensuring the safety of workers, infrastructure and first responders. Requiring contractors working near existing utilities to employ appropriately trained workers will make workers and communities safer, including Minnesota's firefighters. Delaying standards and cutting back on training hours will not.

We urge you to remove the provisions that weaken safety standards for broadband installation.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Scott Vadnais

Captain Scott Vadnais

President



On behalf of the 70,000 skilled construction workers represented by the unions affiliated with the Minnesota Building and Construction Trades Council, I am writing to share our strong opposition to provisions of the Omnibus Agriculture bill that weaken safety standards for broadband installation (House File 1704, Article 2, section 3). The provisions undermine the Broadband Worker Safety legislation passed by the Legislature in 2024 that established minimum qualifications for safety-sensitive positions and supports the development of skilled local workforce.

Unions affiliated with the Minnesota Building Trades represent men and women who build every part of Minnesota's transportation, water and energy infrastructure — from highways and bridges to underground electric and gas distribution lines. Our members use skills learned on the job and through best-in-class training and apprenticeship programs to build infrastructure that is safe and reliable. In return, our contractor partners pay family-supporting wages and benefits necessary for our members to pursue construction as a career, not just a job.

Minnesota Building Trades and our contractor partners are all too aware of the growing crisis in broadband installation. After all, it is union tradesmen and tradeswomen who build the underground gas, electric and other municipal infrastructure that is vulnerable to unsafe broadband installation practices, and who must repair the infrastructure after it has been damaged.

Minnesota maintains high standards in every other area of infrastructure construction — both for the quality of the work and the quality of the resulting jobs. Minnesota's public infrastructure is built with prevailing wage protections that provide a level playing field and encourage contractors to invest in a skilled workforce rather than participate in a race-to-the-bottom. Meanwhile, Minnesota's private energy infrastructure is closely regulated, and both investor-owned and cooperative utilities have similar incentives to invest in high-quality workforce and work.

Unfortunately, the cable and broadband industry is the exception. Broadband providers resist being held to basic standards that apply to other types of critical infrastructure. While contractors who install gas and water lines are required to meet minimum workforce qualifications, an industry whose contractors operate drills around — and sometimes straight through those lines — rejects proposed minimum qualifications designed to prevent a catastrophic incident.

There is no reason we should not keep our increasingly vital broadband infrastructure on a similar path by maintaining minimum training standards, holding broadband providers accountable for their contracting practices, and incentivizing best practices.

It is time for Minnesota to treat broadband as critical infrastructure, not only by investing in deployment of fiber to every home and business in the state, but also by holding the industry accountable to the same standards as other infrastructure operators and recipients of public funds. We urge you to oppose House File 1704 which will make Minnesota workers and communities less safe and risk public and utility infrastructure.

Thank you,

Tom Dicklich, Executive Director



March 14, 2025

Chair Torkelson, Lead Stephenson and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee:

On behalf of 300,000 union members who live and work in communities across Minnesota, we are writing to urge you to oppose provisions of the Omnibus Agriculture bill (House File 1704) that weaken safety standards for broadband installation.

The Broadband Worker Safety legislation passed by the Legislature in 2024 strengthened broadband worker and public safety by supporting the development of a skilled local workforce. A skilled, well-trained workforce will help to protect the integrity of existing public and utility infrastructure.

Reliable high-speed internet service is essential to the well-being of Minnesotans and access to education, health care, job opportunities, and other critical services. The State of Minnesota will soon receive and re-grant more than \$650 million in Federal funding to broadband providers, in addition to more than \$100 million in state funds, fueling well over \$1 billion in total investment in broadband infrastructure. We strongly support Minnesota's goal of providing universal high-speed internet connections to families and businesses in every corner of the state, but we need to do it right.

Many broadband installation workers are paid substandard wages, lack health and retirement benefits, and receive no formal training. Inexperience, lack of training and pressure to work quickly contribute to mistakes that jeopardize the safety of workers and members of the public along with the integrity of existing public utility infrastructure. Contractors that install broadband and other data lines are estimated to be responsible for hundreds of incidents of third-party damage to public and utility infrastructure annually.

Weakening safety standards for broadband installation will make Minnesota workers and communities less safe and risk public and utility infrastructure. Please vote No.

Sincerely,

Bernie Burnham
President

Brad Lehto
Secretary-Treasurer

OFFICIAL
LOCAL 19

175 Aurora Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55103

Phone: 651/227-7647
Fax: 651/227-3801

Web Site: www.mnafcio.org