

Mead mandates ENDOW policies

[By Joel Funk Wyoming Tribune Eagle Via Wyoming News Exchange](#)

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CHEYENNE - Wyoming's governor put the weight of his office behind a plan to diversify the state's economy with two executive orders and directions to a top state agency Friday.

Gov. Matt Mead joined the ENDOW Executive Council at Laramie County Community College on Friday for the first time in 2018. ENDOW - which stands for Economically Needed Diversity Options for Wyoming - is Mead's initiative to diversify the state's economy through the next decades.

The ENDOW council released its preliminary findings earlier this year, with 10 recommendations for policymakers to consider heading into the Wyoming Legislature's budget session, which begins Feb. 12. Those recommendations include improving access to broadband and technology and increasing higher education attainment.

With that in mind, Mead signed two executive orders and a letter addressed to the Wyoming Department of Transportation, in part addressing those goals.

The first executive order established an educational attainment goal for 67 percent of the state's population to hold a post-secondary certificate or degree by 2025 and 82 percent by 2040. It calls on the Wyoming Community College Commission, the state's seven community colleges and the University of Wyoming to collaborate on a plan to achieve that goal and submit progress reports.

The second multi-tiered order mandates the state to use technology products and services within Wyoming to provide contracting opportunities for local technology businesses bidding on state contracts.

Finally, the letter to WYDOT Director Bill Panos called on the agency to research a "one dig" policy facilitating the installation of broadband infrastructure as part of highway construction and other projects.

Wyoming is at the top in the U.S. for high school diploma holders, but falls to 41st for the percentage of the population with bachelor's degrees or higher. And while Wyoming has historically provided high-paying jobs for those without degrees or certificates, thanks to the mineral extraction industry, most expect the state will need to increase its percentage of credential-holding workers in order to attract new sectors that would diversify its economy.

Laramie County Community College President Joe Schaffer told the ENDOW council Thursday that reaching the 67 percent goal by 2025 would be difficult. But he said setting lofty goals has its advantages.

"I'd like to say stretch goals like that are always useful, and actually motivating," Schaffer said. "We know there are states moving in that direction."

Schaffer presented six recommendations to the ENDOW council Thursday to help educators meet what was, at the time, only a proposed attainment goal. Pushing Wyoming graduates to college or certifications alone won't get the state to 67 percent, he said. It would include providing incentives for adults to return to school, as well as attracting high school graduates and transfers from outside of Wyoming.

The lowest-hanging fruit and the place Schaffer would start is adult education, he said. But he said all the recommendations would need to work in concert.

"No doubt it's an uphill battle," he said. "Without the programs, systems and support, we're not going to get there. We're all going to have to work together on it."

From the beginning of ENDOW, it was Mead's instruction to the Executive Council to "be bold" in its goals. The executive order, it seems, fits into that criterion.

"We didn't want to be at the back of the pack, we didn't want to be in the middle, we wanted to be a leader," he said.

Wyoming spends between \$100 million and \$150 million annually on technology-related services for the state. But on a deeper dive, the ENDOW council found only 3-5 percent of that was spent on companies inside the state. With those figures in the ENDOW preliminary report, it seemed like something the state's top executive could latch onto and act on immediately, said Matt Kaufman, Executive Council member.

Kaufman is also co-founder and acting chairman of the Array School of Technology and Design, a Cheyenne-based coding school.

The order puts a mandate on all state agencies, boards and commissions to first source technology-related services or products with a Wyoming company. If there isn't a company providing that product or service, a notification process goes out so people have the opportunity to create companies and bid on the contracts. If a contract is awarded to an out-of-state contractor when a Wyoming business also submitted a qualified proposal, the state entity would be required to document why the award was in the state's best interest.

"We see it as being a potential jumpstart to the technology economy in Wyoming," Kaufman said.

As the state looks to expand its broadband internet access, Mead said it would be important that WYDOT consider that infrastructure when constructing or repairing roadways.

"If you're going to be preparing a road - putting in a road - and there's going to be an opportunity to put a conduit in, do it the first time, do it as a package," he said. "It saves money. It provides an opportunity for companies in the future."

When Mead first took office, he said it was a challenge for companies to work with installing infrastructure in state rights of way. While he said there's been significant progress in that regard, Mead would like to see more done to improve the access.

WYDOT was directed to evaluate the best practices of other states and communities to determine policies to implement and facilitate private sector broadband deployment. He asked the department to

develop plans for broadband conduits and other related projects in highway construction, preferably by the private sector, but by WYDOT, if necessary. The plan is expected on the governor's desk by June 18.

Mead said he knows that's a tight timeline. But as with everything with ENDOW, he said there's a sense of urgency to move forward with initiatives.

"While it's a short timeframe, the clock is ticking on all of us with ENDOW," he said.