Agricultural workers in China climb aboard high-tech InfoWagons as Microsoft launches rural-computing pilot programs in China and India intended to fuel social and economic empowerment for the world’s underserved populations.

ZHENGZHOU, China, April 23, 2007 – Today in Henan province, Chinese government officials take ownership of two “InfoWagons” designed to open up new avenues of digital literacy for rural citizens.

At a small village at Luohe, Henan Province in Central China, Will Poole, corporate vice president at Microsoft, participated in a rollout ceremony marking the delivery of two of six InfoWagons donated by Microsoft as part of an innovative rural computing pilot program. The high-tech buses — each outfitted with 15 student PCs and one instructor PC — will serve as computer training centers on wheels as they circulate to rural villages throughout one of China’s most populous province.

Poole and other Microsoft executives also attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony to launch the Integrated Information Training Center at Luohe township.

A relatively underdeveloped and primarily agricultural province, Henan is identified by Microsoft and MII as well-suited to a rural computing general services pilot program. The overall goal of Microsoft’s rural computing programs is to empower people by introducing them to the benefits of information and communications technology (ICT). The effort is central to Microsoft’s global rural computing vision and comes under the umbrella of Microsoft Unlimited Potential, an initiative that reflects the company’s commitment to promote sustained social and economic opportunity for the estimated 5 billion people worldwide who are underserved by technology.

"The entire IT industry agrees that technology access and affordability in the rural computing space is required, but relevance is an equally important consideration," Poole says. "We, as an industry, need to work together to provide technology that has real application and usefulness in people's lives. For example, delivering services that people find relevant for agriculture, healthcare, education and skills training, will help to address the unique needs of rural communities."

Microsoft is working with China’s MII and the provincial governments to extend the benefits of technology to rural populations. Leading the drive are the six InfoWagons equipped with desktop PCs and IT tutors. To deliver services relevant to Chinese farmers and their families, the proposed InfoWagon pilot applications target real-life scenarios accruing to home, work and community. The concept includes PC@home to deliver healthcare information, entertainment and education; PC@work, which focuses on information browsing related to agriculture, crop prices and supply chain management; and PC@community, which focuses on an Information Center for computer training, information search, e-government and e-commerce experiences with the intention of improving the connection of China’s rural farmers with the global marketplace and the government.

Deployed initially in Henan and later expanding into the four additional provinces, the roving InfoWagons will give rural villagers the opportunity to experience and learn...