

## **Feds shouldn't cut cord on rural cell phone systems**

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Last week, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) signaled its intent to cap the Federal Universal Service Fund (USF) "very soon," most likely by Nov. 1. This is especially dangerous for Wisconsin, as the USF provides critical support for wireless companies to build new cell towers in high-cost areas across the country, including rural communities across Wisconsin.

Congress created the USF to make sure that telecommunications technology doesn't leave rural communities behind. The USF has enabled wireless carriers like U.S. Cellular to build hundreds of towers in rural communities nationwide and bring new service to areas that would not have otherwise had access.

Despite this, the FCC is considering a proposal to cap USF support to wireless carriers in rural communities in Wisconsin and across America. In their haste to enact USF "reform" the FCC may enact this cap within the next few weeks - without fully considering the effect of this decision on rural Americans.

Cell phones are no longer luxury items; they are a fundamental necessity. Today, the lack of high-quality wireless coverage in rural areas is a critical public safety issue. First responders, law enforcement and rural citizens all depend on high-quality coverage to reliably deal with critical safety issues ranging from natural disasters to automotive emergencies to domestic violence. Moreover, E-911 technology will not work properly unless an area has high-quality wireless coverage.

A freeze in funding will also widen the technological gap between urban and rural areas in the state, as well as slow economic development in our rural communities by hampering the state's ability to attract new businesses and tourists.

Since becoming eligible to receive federal support in 2002, U.S. Cellular has invested almost \$50 million in USF funds statewide in Wisconsin, in addition to millions of internally generated capital. With USF funding, U.S. Cellular has built towers in Bailey's Harbor, Muscoda, Colgate, Brodhead, Sparta and St. Francis, all towns with populations less than 10,000. If the FCC succeeds in capping the USF, Wisconsin could lose as much as \$7 million annually and as many as 20 new towers could be jeopardized.

Those who favor a cap fail to acknowledge the real reason for fund growth: Over the past three years, more than 10 percent of wireline customers have "cut the cord;" yet federal support to landline companies remains steady at \$3 billion per year. That excess, which will only accelerate as consumers continue to choose wireless for their voice communication service, is largely funded by wireless consumers, who see no benefit from USF contributions that flow to wireline networks.

U.S. Cellular is calling on Congress and the FCC to protect universal service funding for wireless carriers serving rural America. Rural consumers pay into the fund and deserve access to the same reliable wireless service and choices found in urban America. With universal service support, U.S. Cellular stands ready to deliver high-quality wireless service in rural parts of Wisconsin - everywhere that Wisconsin customers live, work and play. For more information, please visit [www.connectingruralamerica.org](http://www.connectingruralamerica.org).

We cannot afford to cap USF funding for wireless customers, because we cannot afford to leave rural America behind.

***John Rooney is president and chief executive officer of U.S. Cellular, the sixth-largest wireless services provider in the nation.***