



FCC may freeze funds for rural cell phone service

By Liz Welter

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Trying to get a cell phone connection while driving around Marshfield and throughout Clark County can be an exasperating experience.

But it might not get better any time soon.

The Federal Communications Commission probably will freeze the money it contributes to the delivery of cell phone service in rural areas.

"Now our coverage is dicey, especially in the areas where we have a lot of ATVs (all terrain vehicles)," said Jennifer Lord-Kouraichi, director of Clark County emergency services.

"If there's an accident and they try to call, then we have a problem," Lord-Kouraichi said.

A fee on customers' monthly bills raises the money to support cellular phone service in rural areas through the FCC's universal service fund. Each phone service provider pays 11 percent of their long distance charges into the service fund.

"The universal service fund provides approximately \$4 billion per year in high-cost support," said FCC Chairman Kevin Martin. High-cost support is the money that goes to rural providers to keep rates comparable to urban areas.

But the FCC's universal fund is not keeping pace with the booming demand for cellular phone access. By capping the fund at the current level for one year, the FCC will have time to explore funding options, Martin said.

"We have to make sure that rural residents in Wisconsin don't get left behind," said Richard Stadelman, executive director of the Wisconsin Towns Association.

"Limiting federal support for wireless growth will not only widen the technological gap faced by Wisconsin's rural residents, it will hinder economic development and jeopardize public safety," he said.