



10/23/2007

Rural areas in trouble if FCC fund is capped

By KRIS WILLIAMS , Hub Regional Correspondent

ANSLEY — Accident victims, injured farmers or landowners with uncontrolled fires could be without a way to contact emergency aid in Nebraska's most rural areas where cell phone service may never exist.

The Federal Communications Commission has signaled its intent to cap funds that bring cell phone towers to those areas.

As early as Nov. 1, the FCC could stop the critical funding that wireless companies use to help build new cell phone towers in high-cost areas across the country, including rural communities in Nebraska.

Ansley Fire Chief Ervie Ferguson said Monday that emergency personnel can't risk safety on unreliable wireless service. He pointed out that most people carry cell phones, and without cell towers in remote corners of rural America, there is the possibility that emergency calls could go unanswered.

Ferguson's comments came during a news conference Monday in Ansley.

The CEO of U.S. Cellular used the conference to announce his company's recently expanded wireless network coverage near Broken Bow and Mason City.

U.S. Cellular President and CEO John E. Rooney of Chicago also expressed his concern over the impending FCC decision. He testified in June before a Senate Commerce Committee regarding the issue.

"With this, they are saying 'If you fall into a ditch in the middle of Nebraska, look for a pay phone,'" Rooney said. "This is poor policy. They're (FCC) just not doing the right thing for the people outside the city."

Rooney asked that people "bombard" the FCC with letters and e-mails asking officials to reconsider that stance on use of the Universal Service Fund.



The USF is the monthly surcharge on all phone bills that since 1996, has been used to build telecommunications infrastructure in rural and underserved areas. The newest U.S. Cellular tower near Ansley and others near Anselmo and Dunning are some of the towers that have been built using the funds.

If the FCC goes through with its plan to limit USF monies to wireless companies, the construction of future towers is at stake. Rooney said it costs his company about \$300,000 to build one tower site and added that not only his wireless company's coverage is at stake. Towers for other wireless carriers such as Alltel and Viaero would be affected.

The Universal Service Fund provides "critical support for rural cell towers," Rooney said, adding that other than safety issues, a lack of wireless coverage would also stagnate new business growth in rural areas.

Rural people should be able to access telecommunications services the same as urban areas do, Rooney said.

Ansley Village Clerk Laynette Doane agreed when she said cell phones are vital to the everyday lives of the people in Ansley and rural America.

"We can't all live in the city, and we don't all want to live in the city," she said.

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Get Involved

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