

Iowa Farmer Today

Rural cell phone tower funding pushed

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DES MOINES --- Local cell phone provider U.S. Cellular and a leading Iowa law enforcement official are urging the federal government to preserve funding that helps pay to build cell phone towers in rural areas.

Some rural areas of Iowa still remain without cell phone coverage, which Clay County Sheriff Randy Krukow said is an important public safety issue.

“This stuff is critical. I mean, you’re talking life or death,” said Krukow, who is president of the Iowa State Sheriffs’ & Deputies’ Association.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is considering a cap on the Universal Service Fund. The fund is used to ensure rural residents who are expensive to serve can get phone service at rates comparable to those in urban areas.

Currently, close to \$4 billion a year is spent on the effort, up from \$2.6 billion in 2001.

Krukow said cell phone coverage has improved in his county, but areas still exist without coverage, a problem he hears from law enforcement officials from all over the state.

Emergency personnel can use cell phones to track those who are in trouble but can’t describe their location.

Recently, Krukow’s department was able to find people involved in a fatal accident because of the cell phone technology.

He hopes federal officials are listening.

Federal dollars have helped U.S. Cellular build towers in the Iowa communities of Buffalo Center, Neola, Paullina, Missouri Valley, Tripoli, Camanche, Little Sioux and Rowley among others.

U.S. Cellular President and CEO John Rooney is concerned federal officials are considering capping funding and believes it will hurt areas of rural America significantly.

Rooney said building a tower typically costs about \$300,000, but the return on the investment is smaller in rural areas where they are serving fewer customers.

“If you have a town of 500 people, which is what many parts of rural America are made

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up of, the cost of putting up the tower, you'll never get it repaid," Rooney said in a phone interview.

He lists several towers the company has built in Iowa recently, and said they wouldn't have been built without federal assistance. Rooney said bringing cell phone service to those towns also helps attract businesses.

U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, said ensuring rural Iowans have access to affordable, reliable telephone service has been one of his top priorities.