



What we need is a strong, stable signal

Public safety would suffer if the FCC stymies rural wireless development

October 28, 2007

As a law enforcement official in a remote region of Maine, I've learned firsthand the lack of high-quality wireless communications coverage in rural areas of New England is a critical public safety issue.

First responders, firefighters and law enforcement officers all depend on high-quality coverage to handle emergency situations, ranging from natural disasters to car accidents to domestic violence. In many cases, reliable wireless service can literally mean the difference between life and death.

My son is a paramedic in rural Maine and is often the first on scene, for example, when a logging truck overturns on the highway. In many cases, there is no cellular phone service or radio service at the accident scene. This means he must flag down passing motorists and ask them to drive to a house with landline service to call for assistance. The alternative is to climb a nearby hill and hope he can catch a signal, leaving the injured in the hands of a single paramedic. The delay in arranging care and helicopter transportation can be life-threatening.

To bridge the telecommunications service gaps between urban and rural communities like mine, Congress established the federal Universal Service Fund (USF), which provides critical support for telecommunications companies to build new towers in areas across the country where networks would otherwise be financially infeasible.

In remote parts of New England, there is a great need for reliable cellular phone coverage so that public safety officials are able to respond quickly in emergency situations. Unfortunately for the residents of these rural areas, this much-needed USF support could soon be in jeopardy.

Earlier this month, the Federal Communications Commission signaled its intent to cap the USF "very soon" - most likely by Nov. 1. Maine's rural wireless carriers estimate a cap, if adopted by the FCC and allowed to become effective by Congress, would cost Maine about \$2 million. That's the equivalent of about five cellular sites per year, for as long as the cap stays in effect.

So, just as USF funding for Maine's rural wireless carriers has begun to kick in, the FCC



may decide to cap it.

A cap on USF funding would be disastrous. Absence of good wireless service prevents those of us responsible for public safety in America's rural areas from doing our jobs

properly and providing the services our citizens deserve. Poor wireless service exposes both rural law enforcement officials and the public to unreasonable health and safety risks and greatly compromises the public safety community's ability to carry out our duties in the event of a natural or man-made disaster.

As a law enforcement officer, my utmost priority is to ensure the safety of the citizens in my community. I therefore believe it is critical that all Americans, regardless of geography, have equal access to reliable wireless networks.

A cap on federal support for the expansion and upgrading of rural wireless technology would unfairly jeopardize the safety and well-being of rural Americans in New England and around the country.

Everett Flannery is chief deputy of the Kennebec County Sheriff's Office.

