



## **FCC Move May Hurt Rural Service**

By Dane Neal

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HOT SPRINGS – A new U.S. Cellular cell phone tower atop Rich Mountain gives Hot Springs subscribers better coverage — not just for their daily calls, but also for emergencies.

With help from a federal fund, the wireless provider donated a more secure electrical supply for the Madison County 911 service, replacing a solar-powered system that had been the repeated target of vandalism, said Teresa Ogle, the county's 911 director.

"We would not have been able to put in that power ourselves," Ogle said. "We would love to have more cell towers go up. We are a rural area here. It would be good when you're out on a mountainside to be able to call 911 if you have a wreck."

But U.S. Cellular argues that rural customers in North Carolina and across the nation might not get needed improvements if the Federal Communications Commission moves ahead with a cap on how much the company can withdraw from the Universal Service Fund.

The fund was established in 1996 to increase access to advanced telecommunications services throughout the nation at rates comparable to urban areas. Telecommunications companies pay into the fund, generally passing on the charges to their customers, although they are not required to do so by the FCC.

U.S. Cellular filed a petition in October 2004 to become eligible for \$3.8 million from the fund to build networks in rural areas of North Carolina like Madison County. That would help with about 20 different sites around the state, according to Jay Ellison, the company's chief operating officer, based in Chicago.

But the FCC is considering a temporary cap on how much wireless companies can draw from the fund. A decision could come as early as this week.