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## **Wireless provider and public safety officials band together to oppose FCC funding cut**

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COLUMBIA — A federally imposed cap on a fund subsidizing the building of rural cell towers brought together an unusual mix of private and public sector representatives Thursday morning.

The message was simple: Without federal funding for cell-tower construction in rural areas, public safety will take a hit because rural cell phone coverage will stop growing.

The news conference was attended by about 25 people at Boone County Fire Protection District station No. 9 at Midway.

Jay Ellison, U.S. Cellular's executive vice president, said the Chicago-based company has expanded cell coverage into rural areas of Missouri through federal support from the Universal Service Fund. The fund distributes grant money to wireless providers to build cell towers. But if the Federal Communications Commission cap becomes policy, federal support could be frozen.

And that's when it becomes a public safety issue, said Steve Paulsell, chief of the Fire Protection District. Paulsell and the fire district relies on wireless services as county firefighters cover 532 square miles of mid-Missouri, the largest of any fire department in the state.

"A heart attack's a heart attack, no matter where you are," Paulsell said.

The FCC is proposing the cap on further cell-tower construction projects in rural towns and villages because the agency says it can't afford to continue spending at its current rate. Later this month, the FCC is expected to decide whether to cap the fund, which is partially paid for by phone customers.

In 2000, the Universal Service Fund distributed \$1 million to the wireless companies. In 2006, the fund spent nearly \$1 billion. In 2008, projects costs could climb to \$2 billion.

The growth is largely because multiple wireless companies get federal funds to serve the same wireless areas.

The proposed cap would revert funding back to the 2006 level.

For a company such as U.S. Cellular, which was only authorized to build towers in Missouri this year, that means getting left out of the federal funding.

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The overlap of companies serving the same rural areas isn't as prevalent in Missouri as in other states. Missouri ranked 44th nationally in the amount of Universal Service Fund subsidies it received for wireless service in 2006. U.S. Cellular and other wireless companies can't afford to have appropriations capped at last year's \$100,000 figure, company officials said.

"It's just not right," Ellison said. "It's just not fair."

Colleen Coble, chief executive officer of the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, said a cell phone can be crucial in helping domestic violence victims escape harm and get help.

"We have a common goal to ensure that rural women have the same access to safety that urban women do," Coble said.

For assaulted women in rural areas, cell phones provide access to law enforcement and emergency responders. Reliable wireless service can mean the difference between life and death, Coble said.

U.S. Cellular has added 10 new Missouri towers with \$3 million of Universal Service Fund support so far. The towers have expanded coverage to Cole Camp, Ellsinore, Fayette, Mansfield, Stover and Warsaw, among other towns that number less than 3,000 people.

Boone County Sheriff's Sgt. Lance Robbins said the sheriff's department has 81 phones with U.S. Cellular. Aside from administrative tasks, Robbins said deputies use the cell phones to communicate with detectives on surveillance because they provide more security than radio communication. As a supervisor in the northern region, he said he knows where the "holes" are in coverage.

"There's nothing worse than being on something and you need to talk to someone, and your stuff doesn't work," Robbins said.