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Letters to the editor

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Better wireless phone coverage needed

To the Editor:

I am writing to alert you to a critical public safety issue affecting residents of York County — the lack of high-quality wireless coverage in rural areas. As our community gears up for what looks like a long, severe, unpredictable and oftentimes dangerous winter, it is critical that we are able to count on a strong, reliable wireless signal as it is often a primary means of communication during emergency situations.

The month of December has seen numerous snow storms, leaving behind a couple of feet of snow across much of the state. The winter storms have claimed a life in Saco, and they have been bad enough for Gov. John Baldacci to send state workers home early from work.

As a law enforcement official in Maine, I can testify that the lack of high-quality wireless coverage in rural areas is a critical public safety concern in Maine and in states around the country. First responders, firefighters and police officers all depend on reliable coverage to handle emergency situations ranging from natural disasters, car accidents to reports of domestic violence.

In many cases, reliable wireless service can literally mean the difference between life and death, especially at this time of year when severe weather can cause hazardous road conditions and widespread power outages.

Despite this, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently signaled its intent to cap the Universal Service Fund (USF) "very soon" — and could do so any day. Maine's rural wireless carriers estimate that a cap would cost Maine about \$2 million per year, jeopardizing the construction of dozens of new sites. This would compromise public safety resources and further put us at a disadvantage during winter storms.

To this end, I support Connecting Rural America, an effort aimed to ensure that rural residents across the country have equal access to a strong, reliable wireless network. I urge you to visit www.connectingruralamerica.org to learn more and to take a stand for rural America.

Maurice Ouellette

York County Sheriff