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MEMO TO FCC FROM THE BOONIES

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Unclear on the concept.

That's the only explanation for the attitude of this country's chief telecommunications official, Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin, who said recently that he's concerned about the high cost of subsidizing cell phone tower construction in rural areas that don't have the customers to justify the expense.

Well, duh. This has got to be a guy who never travels to a place where he can't get cell phone reception.

Here in Maine, those rural areas wouldn't be rural if they had lots of people in them. If they had lots of people in them, then they'd be profitable places for telephone companies to provide cell phone service. But they don't, ergo the need for government subsidies to extend the important capacity to get cell phone reception in the willywacks.

Or are we just supposed to say "tough luck" to those who live on the back side of beyond? By that reasoning, we would never have electrified our rural landscape during the earlier part of the last century.

But we did, because as a nation we realized that the benefits of the modern world should not be isolated to city dwellers. Now, the FCC is debating cutting back on the government funds that have so far subsidized the extension of cell phone service into the countryside. As anyone who has traveled outside of the Beltway surely knows, in some rural areas, you can count on losing your connection with every dip in the road, every rise of a hill. Those connections are necessary, not the least for the safety of our rural residents.

So here's a challenge to Commissioner Martin: Come to Maine and spend a week working up in Washington, Somerset and Kennebec counties. Have your driver tootle you around from town to town (you can recognize a town, Commissioner, because it usually has a gas station in it or a Renys, which is our version of a department store). Try to conduct all your business from your -- disconnected, sorry -- car, or the side -- disconnected again, darn! -- of the road, or the hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon -- heck! lost you again! -- attached to the gas station at the --

Silence.

No service.

And then tell us about those rural customers who don't justify the expense of extending cell phone service. When you're one of them, things might look a little different.