

Valley Free Press

Cell phone cap bad for rural

Cell phones are no longer just luxury items; they are a fundamental necessity to law enforcement, personal safety and commercial prosperity.

U.S. Cellular has made great progress in strengthening rural networks using internally-generated capital, but much more can be done through the federal Universal Service Fund (USF). Unfortunately, the FCC is considering a cap on the USF for wireless providers that want to build new rural networks.

There are many rural areas in Illinois where new towers will not be constructed any time soon, if ever, unless USF is provided to help defray expenses.

Congress created the USF in 1996 to make sure that telecommunications technology doesn't leave rural communities behind. If the FCC freezes funding, the technological gap faced by Illinois' rural communities widens.

Without high-quality wireless coverage, first responders, law enforcement and rural citizens cannot quickly deal with critical safety issues like natural disasters, automotive emergencies and domestic violence. A freeze also will slow economic development and prevent people in rural areas from enjoying the same advanced technology enjoyed in urban areas.

U.S. Cellular is among the several cell phone companies with applications pending that would allow more USF funds to flow in to the state, but a cap would freeze Illinois' USF support at 2006 levels - just \$1,971.

The FCC is calling for "reform" because the USF is growing so quickly. In 2007, wireless providers will contribute roughly \$2.5 billion - more than 1/3 of total funding - to the \$7 billion USF. And since 1999, more than \$22 billion in funding provided from consumer contributions has been paid to America's rural landline phone companies, while less than \$2 billion has gone to rural wireless carriers.

Yet, federal support to landline companies remains steady at \$3 billion per year. Real reform will come when we stop subsidizing landline phone companies and strengthen the resources made available to rural residents.

The FCC may enact this cap on the USF within the next 4-8 weeks and needs to know this is unfair and unacceptable.

Visit the Connecting Rural America coalition Web site at www.connectingruralamerica.org to make your voice heard.

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