

Can't afford to leave rural America behind

By John E. Rooney, President and CEO, U.S. Cellular
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Dear Editor:

I was recently asked to testify before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee concerning proposed changes to the Universal Service Fund (USF). Congress created the USF to provide carriers with an incentive to build communications networks in sparsely populated rural areas that would otherwise not support investment.

In 2007 alone, wireless providers will contribute over \$2.6 billion to the \$7 billion fund. Since 1999, more than \$22 billion in consumer contributions has gone to rural landline phone companies, while less than \$2 billion has gone to rural wireless carriers.

Despite this, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is considering a proposal to cap USF support to wireless carriers.

The effect of such a cap could be disastrous as Chief Deputy Sheriff Everett Flannery of rural Kennebec County, Maine, made clear during the Senate hearing. Public safety officials often count on wireless service in emergency situations.

In Iowa, U.S. Cellular has used federal USF support to construct tens of millions of dollars of new wireless infrastructure.

Last year, U.S. Cellular used more than \$25 million in USF funds to bring reliable wireless service to more than 35 smaller cities and towns across the state. Many of these cities, such as Spillville, Buffalo Center, Neola, Paullina, Missouri Valley, Tripoli and Camanche, have populations of less than 5,000.

Without universal service funding, it would have been impossible to support wireless infrastructure investment in these areas.

A freeze in funding will only widen the technological gap between urban and rural areas in the state and cost Iowa millions annually in critical federal support.

That is why U.S. Cellular is supporting Connecting Rural America, a diverse grassroots coalition. Visit www.connectingruralamerica.org to make your voice heard.

We cannot afford to leave rural America behind.