

TENNESSEAN

Feds must make money available for better rural cell service

By JOHN E. ROONEY

Published: Tuesday, 07/17/07

Tennessee Voices

As Tennesseans know, cell phones are no longer a novelty but a necessity. From public safety to economic development, wireless communication has proven its value time and time again.

If we can't find a way to narrow the technological gap between urban and rural areas, economic development will suffer. As things stand, many of Tennessee's rural residents are still working hard to secure the reliable wireless infrastructure that helps attract new businesses and tourists.

The lack of high-quality wireless coverage in rural areas is a critical public safety issue, as well. First responders, law enforcement and rural citizens all depend on high-quality coverage to deal with critical safety issues ranging from natural disasters to vehicular emergencies to domestic violence.

This is as true in rural Tennessee as it is anywhere else. Randy Porter, EMS/911 director for Putnam County, recently advised us that wireless service between Putnam County and the Davidson County line can mean the difference between life and death. "If your car turns over on a back road in Buffalo Valley or Glade Creek," he said, "a cell phone may be your only way to get help."

However, E-911 technology will not work properly unless an area has high-quality wireless coverage.

We need to do more, and we can do more. For the past decade, telecommunications providers have drawn from the federal Universal Service Fund (USF) to help build infrastructure in sparsely populated areas.

Unfortunately, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) wants to cap the funds that make wireless development possible.

This would hit Tennessee especially hard because, while consumers statewide contribute an estimated \$125 million into the federal USF, the state currently draws out only \$1.5 million per year to use on wireless infrastructure. Tennessee could lose as much as \$3.3 million in USF funding for wireless per year. Land-line companies, meanwhile, will not be affected by the cap

and will continue to receive \$52 million annually from the USF.

U.S. Cellular has proudly served Eastern Tennessee for 21 years, and we have applied to the FCC to draw USF funds in Tennessee. This application could provide an estimated \$3 million per year and allow us to serve more rural residents. With USF funding, U.S. Cellular would construct five new sites per year for the next five years in communities such as Forbus, Idlewild, Rugby and Allardt. If the USF is capped, however, this critical expansion will be delayed.

Rural Tennesseans deserve the same access to reliable telecommunication as residents in larger communities. U.S. Cellular has used internally generated capital to expand service in urban and rural communities across Tennessee for many years. USF funds are necessary to bring wireless to Tennessee's more remote communities, as their size won't support stand-alone investment — and the USF was created expressly to aid these communities.

The USF must support the growing demand for wireless. To this end, U.S. Cellular is supporting Connecting Rural America, a grassroots coalition. Learn more and make your voice heard at www.connectingruralamerica.org.

We can't afford to leave rural America behind.

Published: Tuesday, 07/17/07
