

JOHN E. ROONEY  
Mainers  
deserve  
wireless  
access

I was recently asked to testify before Sen. Olympia Snowe and the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee about an issue near and dear to Mainers: rural wireless access, and how a proposed freeze on the federal Universal Service Fund (USF) will affect it.

The USF is meant to help build telecommunications networks in rural, sparsely populated areas. However, the current funding model is broken.

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

Despite this, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is considering reducing this already-limited funding for rural wireless by capping the USF support for wireless.

An unfair cap on funding for wireless would be a disaster, especially for public safety and community leaders like Chief Deputy Sheriff Everett Flannery of Kennebec County, who also testified before Sen. Snowe. He testified that public safety officials and the people who depend on them rely on wireless service in emergency situations — whether the emergency involves domestic violence, a hostage situation or a breach of homeland security.

Since becoming eligible to draw support in Maine two years ago, U.S. Cellular has invested USF support to con-

struct, maintain and operate wireless facilities in rural communities across the state. In 2007, U.S. Cellular plans to build 36 new sites, and an estimated 100,000 Mainers will benefit from the new network service provided with these towers. Twenty-one of these 36 sites will be funded by the USF, and will bring service to rural communities such as Grand Isle, Union and Peru.

However, if the cap goes through, Maine stands to lose at least \$2 million a year in USF funding, jeopardizing our wireless investments each year the cap is in place.

Supporters of the freeze argue that it's necessary to slow the growth of the USF. Yet they fail to acknowledge the real reason the fund has grown: over the past three years, more than 10 percent of landline customers have "cut the cord," nevertheless, USF support to landline companies remains steady at \$3 billion a year.

Regardless of a cap on wireless funding, advances in and demand for wireless technology will continue. More and more people will get wireless phones and pay into the USF, and these contributors deserve the benefits that Congress promised — access to wireless services that are reasonably comparable to those available in urban areas. And that's exactly what we're providing when we use USF to build sites in rural areas.

We are fast becoming a wireless nation, and to provide the best possible service to rural Americans, wireless carriers need a fair share of universal service funding. That is why U.S. Cellular is supporting Connecting Rural America, a diverse coalition of public safety officials, business leaders and concerned citizens across the country, in an effort to take a stand for rural America. Visit [www.connectingruralamerica.org](http://www.connectingruralamerica.org) to make your voice heard.

We cannot afford to cap USF funding for wireless consumers, because we cannot afford to leave rural America behind.

*John E. Rooney is president and CEO at U.S. Cellular.*

