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Wireless access for all

By Sen. Olympia Snowe
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The Universal Service Fund was created as a part of the 1996 Telecommunications Act in order to ensure that all Americans have reasonable access to communications services. This program has been a critical component in keeping Americans in rural parts of the country, like Maine, connected to essential wireless services. As ranking member of the Senate Commerce Committee, I participated in a hearing last week dedicated to the reform of the USF.

During this hearing, I joined my Senate colleagues and a panel of witnesses in discussing a proposal that would freeze federal funds that are used to construct cell phone towers in rural parts of the country. It is imperative that Congress understand the dire implications this proposal could have on rural America, including many individuals in Maine. If accepted, the decision by the Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Services would unfairly discriminate against regions where cellular service is already poor or nonexistent.

Put simply, the Joint Board's recommended cap on USF funding for competitive eligible telecommunications carriers (CETCs) would unduly deter investment that is critical to expanding wireless service in rural America. In Maine, CETCs have used USF funding to build out wireless infrastructure in regions that continue to suffer from cellular telephone coverage that is far below the quality experienced in urban areas of the United States. If these carriers are denied funding to which they are otherwise entitled, construction of additional cell phone towers in underserved areas will be delayed, as will the local residents' access to the telecommunications services the rest of America takes for granted.

This would unfortunately halt the positive investments that two companies have made in the vast rural areas of Maine. U.S. Cellular built twelve cell towers last year in Maine, but six of them were financed with USF money. How well does the Joint Board's recommendation bode for U.S. Cellular's planned construction of 32 more towers? Similarly, Unicel states that the freeze on funding would result in five fewer towers being built. This is the wrong direction for an area of the country that already lags far behind in cell phone service.

Substandard — or nonexistent — wireless service is not merely an inconvenience. When one out of every two 911 calls is placed with a cell phone, as is the case in Maine, lack of

a reliable wireless signal on one's phone could literally be a matter of life and death. Furthermore, economic health in a region is at as great a risk as human health: when struggling rural areas try to lure new economic development to their regions, the inability to receive a wireless signal sends the wrong message to outside investors. Restricting funding to the very companies who take the initiative to serve rural America would be doing a grave injustice to those people who rely on those services.

During the Commerce Committee hearing, we heard testimony from former Sheriff, now Chief Deputy Evert Flannery of Kennebec County. Sheriff Flannery is the lead spokesman of the Maine Sheriff's Association on technology issues, and has been vocal in alerting lawmakers of the public safety hazards that will perpetuate if the Joint Board's recommendations are approved—considerations that may have escaped public view in Washington if not for his strong advocacy. In a sparsely populated region, how will residents access 911 services? How will a policeman, responding to a domestic violence complaint, talk to the parties on the other end to calm an otherwise-volatile situation until he can arrive?

It is absolutely essential that these needs are addressed. Lack of wireless service can hinder a region's ability to attract new economic growth and development and makes it difficult for local law enforcement personnel to effectively and efficiently serve the community. While the USF may be in need of reform, it is clear that the best solution must comprise a visionary future for rural America, and must be even-handed, applying equitably to all segments of the voice communication industry.

That is why earlier this month I sent a letter to all members of the Federal Communications Commission, urging them to review and reconsider any proposal presented by the Joint Board that unfairly harms rural America. Our entire world revolves around wireless communications and there is no doubt that everyone, from the rural areas to the urban centers, should have access to it.

Republican Sen. Olympia Snowe represents Maine in the [U.S. Senate](#).