

Will the FCC Stay Committed to Rural America...

By Byron L. Dorgan

Almost every month, a new telecommunications innovation is launched that has a profound impact on our lives.

Lately we've seen the impact of these telecommunication changes in ways we never could have imagined. In past months we've witnessed the Egyptian government being toppled by citizens using their cell phones to organize mass rallies and send videos of shocking violence against the demonstrators around the world. And in just recent days we learned it was through sophisticated tracking of a cell phone that led our soldiers to Osama bin Laden's doorstep in Pakistan. In both cases, a broadband wireline network infrastructure transported these important communications and changed history.

Nearly every day, billions of citizens around the globe are using their telephones, both land line and mobile, in ordinary and extraordinary ways, empowering them to do new and different things. This is possible because their governments have made access to telecommunications a priority.

Here in the U.S., these communications tools are essential for our daily lives. We almost take for granted that every American has access to them. But that's not the case. People who live in rural areas have often struggled to get telephone and broadband service. They get their service only when one of the smaller telephone companies in their rural area builds out new services to their customers.

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That question is going to be answered by the actions of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the coming months. Unless the FCC protects a time-honored principle called "universal service," millions of rural Americans could be left behind in this telecommunications revolution.

"Universal service" has a long history. Decades ago, our country decided that telephone service was an essential service, and we made a commitment that no matter where you live, even in the most rural reaches of our country, you should have access to the same telecommunication services available to those in the bigger cities. Comparable service at an affordable price — that was the basis of the policy of "universal service." It's the law of the land.

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Now there is a real danger that the FCC could seriously undermine the concept of “universal service.” They have begun “reforming” the Universal Service Fund (USF) that helps communications providers (both wire-line and wireless) finance the commitments they have made to connect our remote and rural areas.

USF funding, along with inter-carrier compensation (the system by which providers pay one another for use of their networks), have been key to ensuring that all Americans have access to telecommunications services no matter where they live. Recent regulatory changes have diminished these funds, which small telephone companies rely on to provide service in rural America and maintain their crucial network infrastructures. Changes are absolutely necessary to reflect today’s broadband world. But as these changes are made, let’s make sure we strengthen — not weaken — the system that has helped connect rural America for decades.

There is plenty of reason to worry that actions taken by the FCC could have a devastating effect on the ability of smaller and rural telephone companies to continue to provide the most advanced telecommunication services to their customers.

The FCC document proposing a new “Connect America Fund” as a substitute for USF describes their interest in “market-driven” policies. But history has shown us that if we had relied on the “market” to move electricity and telephone service to rural and high-cost areas, we’d still be waiting. (Or, as a breathless observer once said, “we’d still be watching television by candlelight.”)

This rulemaking is serious business. And the FCC is pushing to complete it in the next four months.

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I believe the first step for the FCC must be to recommit to the principle of “universal service.” The wrong decision by the FCC could be a disaster for the economic future of high-cost and rural areas. Without access to the latest and best telecommunications services, rural areas of our country will be on the wrong side of the digital divide, and consigned to a future without economic opportunity or development.

Reform done right could pave the way for sustained service and the universal build-out of the latest telecommunications services to all Americans in every region of our country, as well as the economic opportunities that come with it. That is the path I hope the FCC will choose.

This article appeared in the June 3, 2011 edition of Opt-Ed in the Hill’s Congress Blog. Dorgan is a former Senator from North Dakota. Watch Cable Channel 20 or visit www.nelson-tel.net to see Mr. Dorgan’s video encouraging people to get involved in the campaign to save rural broadband.

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