

While the nation's eyes are on the results of this year's historic presidential election, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) plans to vote on changes to the Universal Service Fund (USF) that may dramatically reduce, or in some cases eliminate altogether, the support available today to expand rural cell phone service across America, jeopardizing economic development and public safety in smaller communities. The FCC has been considering various proposals for cutting the portion of the USF used to support the construction and expansion of cell phone and wireless communication technology in rural areas -- and has plans for making that decision on Election Day, November 4.

This vote places in jeopardy the nearly \$1 billion currently made available for wireless, which would have been used to construct hundreds of cell phone towers every year in rural communities.

"These cuts couldn't come at a worse time for our country's struggling economy," said John E. Rooney, president and CEO of U.S. Cellular. "After taking extraordinary steps to prop up financial markets and grow the economy to the tune of \$700 billion, it seems like a wrong turn to take over a billion dollars away from rural America -- money that would be invested in local economies to create and keep jobs, help struggling communities and develop critical communications infrastructure for the future."

Across America, business owners are increasingly relying on cell phones to manage operations. Missed calls and dropped calls can lead to missed opportunities and dropped client accounts. When this happens, America's rural economic base suffers -- as do family farms, main street businesses and rural schools.

The proposed cuts also pose a significant threat to public safety. In rural America, public safety officials and organizations are speaking out about how important it is to have reliable wireless service. First responders like firefighters and police officers rely on cell phones to assist in search and rescue operations, domestic violence situations, undercover activities and to aid communications in areas where police radio is unsecure or unavailable. Additionally, nearly 300,000 emergency 9-1-1 calls are placed via cell phones every day nationwide.

"For victims of domestic violence, reliable wireless service can literally mean the difference between life and death," said Rita Smith, Executive Director of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "For example, deputies responding to domestic violence disputes in rural communities need to obtain crucial situational information, but often have trouble getting through to the home of the victim. Also, spotty wireless service can hamper a woman's ability to contact hotlines and emergency services or report an incidence of violence."

Opinion polls conducted in a geographically diverse range of states show that an overwhelming number of residents of the states polled feel it is important to have reliable and consistent cellular phone coverage in rural areas for public health and safety.

The opinion polls -- commissioned by Connecting Rural America and conducted statewide in Maine, Missouri, Oregon, West Virginia and Wisconsin -- found that the importance of reliable wireless for health and safety is high, ranging from between 88 percent and 92 percent. Approval of using federal USF support for rural wireless is consistently strong as well, ranging

from 61 percent to 70 percent in all states. (Full summaries of poll results are available on request.)

Connecting Rural America is a grassroots coalition of concerned citizens, community leaders and elected officials working for equality in wireless telecommunications. Its goal is to provide rural communities with the same access to technology as their urban counterparts. Visit <http://www.connectingruralamerica.org/> to learn more.