

<http://www.greatfallstribune.com/article/20110829/OPINION/108290309/Pending-FCC-action-threatens-rural-areas?odyssey=nav%7Chead>

greatfallstribune.com
GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

Pending FCC action threatens rural areas

Aug. 29, 2011

There is a revolution happening in the telecommunications/broadband world fueled by bold investments, innovation and new products. The revolution expands opportunities for our rural Montana communities to connect to the outside world. It also enhances economic development, educational opportunities, advancements in health care and maintains our quality of life.

At the same time, there is action pending before the Federal Communication Commission that poses a real threat to rural Montana.

The FCC was directed to present a comprehensive National Broadband Plan to Congress, and the plan was submitted on March 16, 2010. The plan takes unbelievable and unacceptable steps backward for rural America.

The Communications Act of 1996 established the Universal Service Fund allowing rural America to receive comparable and affordable telecommunications services.

Our provider, 3 Rivers, has prudently put this fund to good use, but the work is not done. 3 Rivers has implemented fiber-to-the-home projects upgrading the network and replacing 30- to 35-year-old copper legacy systems.

We are in the process of completing six of our 26 exchanges and will begin two additional exchanges this summer and fall. Our goal is to deploy fiber-to-the-home to everyone in our traditional service area.

Broadband investment has significant impacts on the exchanges we serve by:

- » Helping businesses and communities grow and thrive;
- » Providing educational opportunities; and
- » Improving health care, public safety and government services.

Because of these investments, Montana rural families are able to stay connected and compete in the global economy while maintaining the lifestyle enjoyed by generations.

By overreacting in the name of reform, the FCC proposal will cause financial harm to 3 Rivers. If implemented, there will be a change in the financial model 3 Rivers has depended upon to provide the services and infrastructure needed by our customers.

It goes beyond the effects to 3 Rivers; there also will be negative economic impacts on the rural communities we serve.

3 Rivers has spent countless hours and significant resources, directly and through member associations, addressing these concerns with the FCC and Congress. We have told our story to all who would listen — and then some. The FCC is moving too far and too fast without fully understanding the unintended consequences to rural America.

Understanding reform is needed, we have joined with other industry stakeholders to present a plan to the FCC that provides a sound foundation for reform throughout rural America.

We are now asking you to get involved.

Please contact Sens. Max Baucus and Jon Tester and Congressman Denny Rehberg. The process is easy to send them a letter.

Go online at www.saveruralbroadband.org then click on the SEND THE LETTER link.

When you see them on their visits throughout the state, share your concerns about the FCC National Broadband Plan and how it will affect you, your cooperative and our communities.

Mike Henning is interim general manager of 3 Rivers Communications, Fairfield.