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The Western Telecommunications Alliance (WTA) represents more than 250 rural incumbent local exchange carriers (ILECs) in 24 states west of the Mississippi River. On average, WTA members serve fewer than 3,000 customers, and fewer than 500 customers per exchange. Its members provide service in some of the nation's most difficult to serve areas – those with low population density, rugged terrain and harsh weather conditions.

WTA members have traditionally been wireline voice providers, but as technology and consumer desires change, they are increasingly providing broadband, wireless and video services as well. WTA member companies are the providers of last resort, and their networks are often the only link that consumers in rural areas have with the national telecommunications network. Whether a consumer in rural America makes a wireline phone call, a cell phone call or sends an email, his or her communication traverses the wireline phone network at some point. Building, maintaining and upgrading rural networks is very expensive and requires continued investment.

As a new Administration and Congress are sworn in next year, the following are priorities for WTA's members:

Expanding Access to and Adoption of Broadband

It is recognized that in the 21st Century access to ubiquitous, affordable broadband is absolutely necessary for economic growth and development. This is particularly true in rural America, and rural ILECs have made significant progress in advancing this goal. The federal Universal Service Fund (USF) has proved to be successful in ensuring that all Americans have access to basic voice service. WTA supports expanding USF to explicitly support broadband deployment in rural areas so that rural consumers have access to the same broadband services (communication, telemedicine, distance learning) that suburban and urban consumers enjoy. In conjunction with this, the current speed at which broadband is defined must be increased. What is considered broadband for official purposes in the United States is inadequate for the needs of today's consumers and pales in comparison to other industrialized nations.

Ensuring Appropriate Compensation for Use of the Network

The current intercarrier compensation rules are antiquated and must be reformed. Consumers need an equitable system by which all users of the communications network support the upkeep and maintenance of the network. Due to changing technology and the lack of up-to-date regulation, many voice calls traverse wireline telecommunications networks while not paying appropriate compensation to those who must construct, operate and maintain them. Some of these calls, referred to as phantom traffic, do not contain adequate identification information to allow for proper billing. Other calls, such as those using VoIP technology (an increasing portion of voice calls), have been handed a substantial competitive benefit over competing voice services by being exempted from the obligation of paying compensation for their use of the networks of other service providers. As the use of VoIP technology increases and the burden of paying for the network falls on a shrinking portion of users, the incentive to invest in the network decreases. If the country wants to see continued investment in an advanced telecommunications network all users of the network should share equally in support of the network.

Ensuring Access to Content on a Non-Discriminatory Basis

As rural ILECs seek to expand broadband access, the more services ILECs can offer over their networks, the more incentive there is to build out that network. Increased subscribership to video services is directly linked to broadband build-out. However, rural ILECs, because of their relatively small market share, face a built-in competitive disadvantage and are discriminated against in regards to pricing and tiering of video content. Rural ILECs deserve nondiscriminatory access to content from the large, vertically integrated content providers.