

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of	)	
	)	
Competitive Carrier Line Count Report and	)	OMB Control Number 3060--0986
Self-Certifications as a Rural Carrier	)	
	)	
FCC Form 481	)	
	)	

**COMMENTS OF
THE WESTERN TELECOMMUNICATION ALLIANCE
REGARDING FCC FORM 481**

The Western Telecommunications Alliance, a trade association representing approximately 250 rural telephone companies ("RLECs") that operate in the twenty-four states located west of the Mississippi River, hereby submits its comments regarding the FCC Form 481 Carrier Annual Reporting Data Collection Form for High-Cost Universal Service Fund Recipients.

WTA recognizes that acceptance of federal high-cost support entails service and reporting obligations to ensure compliance with the statutory mandate that carriers receiving such support shall use it "only for the provision, maintenance, and upgrading of facilities and services for which the support is intended." 47 U.S.C. §254(e). However, during a period when telecommunications infrastructure investment needs have been increasing while the high-cost support and intercarrier compensation revenue streams needed to obtain and repay investment loans have been limited or reduced, the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") should be minimizing the regulatory and reporting costs of high-cost recipients as much as practicable to ensure that as much support as possible goes directly to the improvement of the intended facilities and services. Rather, as RLECs have been squeezed by increasing broadband capacity

needs, capped high-cost support and declining intercarrier compensation revenues, the FCC appears intent upon imposing more and more regulatory and reporting obligations and related compliance costs upon them.

WTA is aware other RLEC associations have commented upon FCC Form 481 before the FCC, and generally concurs with the positions taken by those associations. WTA agrees that other portions of FCC Form 481 are in need of streamlining and modification to increase their utility and to decrease unnecessary burdens, but wishes to focus particularly upon the Service Quality Improvement Reporting (Line 100) and Tribal Lands Reporting (Lines 910-929) sections of FCC Form 481. These two sections raise critical questions regarding: (1) whether the proposed collection of information is necessary for the proper performance of the functions of the FCC (including whether the information will have practical utility); (2) the accuracy of the FCC's reporting burden estimates; (3) ways to enhance the quality, utility, and clarity of the information collected; and (4) ways to minimize the burden on the collection of information on the respondents.

Service Quality Improvement Reporting

The initial Five-Year Plan requirement in Section 54.202(a)(1) of the FCC Rules was designed primarily for FCC-licensed wireless competitive eligible telecommunications carriers ("CETCs") that were not regulated by their states, that were receiving "portable" federal high-cost support which had no relation to their own facilities or costs, and that were frequently subject to FCC build-out requirements in order to retain all or part of their licensed wireless service areas.

Transferring these wireless CETC Five-Year Plan requirements virtually verbatim to RLECs in Section 54.313(a)(1) of the FCC's Rules and in Line 100 of FCC Form 481 creates

substantial timing and other complications. For example, unlike the “portable” support received by wireless CETCs, the high-cost support received by RLECs is tied to their own investment and operating costs but unfortunately lags these costs by two years. Hence, an RLEC in 2014 (during which it will receive high-cost support based upon its 2012 investment and operating costs) must propose a Five-Year Plan for a period beginning in 2014 or 2015 (for which it will receive high-cost support for its investment and operating costs in 2016 or 2017) and ending in 2018 or 2019 (for which it will receive high-cost support for its investment and operating costs in 2020 or 2021).¹ In addition to these lags, advance planning is complicated by various limitations on high-cost support, including unpredictable Quantile Regression Analysis (“QRA”) benchmarks, explicit caps on High Cost Loop Support and corporate operations expense, and budget “targets” that serve as effective caps on total high-cost support and total high-cost support for RLECs.

WTA recognizes that the FCC has recently postponed the filing of Five-Year Plans by RLECs until at least July 1, 2014. However, Line 100 remains in the current version of FCC Form 481, and is discussed on the second page of the FCC’s June 2013 Supporting Statement in this proceeding. These references provide very little guidance regarding the Five-Year Plans that will ultimately be required from RLECs, and thus place major additional future reporting burdens upon reporting RLECs. As recognized by the Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service, RLECs have long done a “commendable job” under the previous high-cost support mechanisms of providing voice and broadband services to nearly all of their subscribers.² However, whereas RLECs were enthusiastic early adopters of broadband, the FCC’s recent

¹ Neither FCC Form 481 (Line 110) nor Section 54.202(a) of the Rules nor Section 54.313(a)(1) of the Rules are clear regarding the specific five-year period for which the required Five-Year Plan must be filed. For example, if a Five-Year Plan is required to be filed on July 1, 2014, should it encompass: (a) Calendar Years 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018; (b) Calendar Years 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019; or (c) the years July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2015, July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016, July 1, 2016 to June 30, 2017, July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018, and July 1, 2018 to June 30, 2019?

² *In the Matter of High-Cost Universal Service Support*, Recommended Decision, WC Docket No. 05-337 and CC Docket No. 96-45, FCC 07J-4, released November 20, 2007, at paras. 30 and 39.

changes to high-cost universal service support and intercarrier compensation revenue streams have created a great deal of uncertainty as to whether (and, if so, how much) RLECs will be able to invest in broadband and other infrastructure improvements in the future. As a result, many RLECs are very worried about committing to specific future infrastructure investment proposals for fear that they will not have the financial resources or be able to obtain or repay the loan or vendor financing needed for such commitments. They feel forced to retain attorneys and consultants at substantial additional expense to draft legalistic language similar to that found in stock prospectuses and Securities and Exchange Commission reports to condition and qualify their proposed five-year service improvement plans so that they can readily be revised, postponed or terminated if sufficient funds or financing are not available, or other circumstances change.

In addition, the required provision of “descri[ptions] with specificity [of] proposed improvements or upgrades to the carrier’s network throughout its proposed service area” and “estimat[i]ons of] the area and population that will be served as a result of the improvements”³ appear to require detailed engineering studies and maps. If so, many small RLECs do not have the personnel or software required to produce such detailed studies and maps, but rather will have to pay consultants to develop and produce them. In addition to the cost, the preparation and review of detailed engineering studies and mapping are likely to take a substantial portion (and possibly all) of the FCC’s estimated maximum 100 hours for completion of the entire FCC Form 481. It will require an RLEC’s employees and consultants to review and analyze its entire network and service area to map the nature and extent of the services presently provided and to determine and map the nature and extent of the service extensions and upgrades to be made during each of the subject future five years. Finally, because each annual FCC Form 481 report

³ Supporting Statement, 3060-0986, June 2013, p. 2.

will require the Five Year Plan to be extended for another year, these engineering and mapping efforts and expenses will be recurring.

Particularly given the two-year lag between RLEC capital and operating expenses and the corresponding RLEC high-cost support, WTA believes that futuristic Five-Year Plans are not necessary for the proper performance of the FCC's statutory Section 254(e) obligation to ensure that RLECs receiving high-cost support use it only for the provision, maintenance, and upgrading of facilities and services for which the support is intended. It would be far more relevant and effective for the FCC's information collection efforts to have individual RLECs show how they used their high-cost support in the Year B for which they are reporting: (a) to make infrastructure investments and/or repay infrastructure loans during Year A (two years previously), in order to improve their service coverage, capacity and quality; (b) to pay maintenance and other operating expenses during Year A, in order to improve their service quality and reliability; and (c) to recover overhead and other costs of doing business during Year A, in order to maintain their local service rates at affordable levels. Using an approach that is wholly congruent with the way that high-cost support is calculated and distributed to RLECs will satisfy the FCC's regulatory needs and enhance the quality, utility and clarity of the information collected. In addition, by eliminating the non-relevant burdens and costs of Five-Year Plan preparation, it will reduce the regulatory burdens upon RLECs to a point well within the FCC's 0.5 hour to 100 hour estimate of the time required to complete the new FCC Form 481, and free up more of their net financial and administrative resources to upgrade their networks and serve their rural customers rather than preparing FCC reports.

Tribal Lands Reporting

WTA understands that the Tribal Government engagement provisions in Section 54.313(a)(9) of the FCC Rules were intended to improve telecommunications service on Tribal lands, as well as to increase cooperation between Tribal Governments and telecommunications carriers.

WTA notes the experience of several of its RLEC members that have sought to initiate the required engagements with Tribal governments. In virtually all such instances, the RLEC requests to schedule meetings and commence the engagement process have been met by a perceived lack of interest on the part of Tribal governments. The common RLEC interpretation of this response is that many of the Tribal governments would be interested if RLECs were in a position to propose substantial new or additional infrastructure deployments at an early date on Tribal lands. However, at a time when uncertain and unpredictable revenue streams are discouraging significant new RLEC investment projects on non-Tribal as well as Tribal lands, WTA members believe that many Tribal governments understandably are not very interested in scheduling meetings to discuss generalities or vague future possibilities. To the extent this is true, other alternatives (for example, budgeting increased high-cost support so that RLECs can deploy more broadband on Tribal lands) would appear to have much more practical utility than the Tribal Government engagement process.

WTA emphasizes that its members are very interested in serving Tribal lands, and in upgrading and extending the networks that they have already built on some Tribal lands. WTA members comply with Tribal rules and procedures (just like they do with other state and local government rules and procedures) regarding rights-of-way, land use permits, facilities siting, environmental review and historical and cultural preservation. It is not clear why or how these

localized Tribal government matters are relevant to the FCC's jurisdiction or regulatory functions, or why Tribal government rules and procedures are singled out for more intensive FCC oversight (*e.g.*, on Lines 924 to 928) than those of other state and local governments. WTA recommends that these portions of FCC Form 481 be deleted unless the FCC can show that it has both jurisdiction and substantial reasons to exercise oversight over these Tribal government functions.

While not evidencing any clear and concrete benefits at this time, the Tribal engagement processes can entail substantial costs that will divert RLEC resources from infrastructure and service improvements on Tribal lands. For example, one Alaskan RLEC serves an area containing over fifty Regional Native Corporations and Village Corporations.⁴ Given Alaska's lack of roads, to fly and meet with all of these separate entities will require a high-level company employee to spend at least 100-to-150 **days** a year in travel and meetings (*i.e.*, many times the 100 hours estimated as necessary to complete FCC Form 481). The cost of such engagements is simply not justified, particularly when the dollars are far more urgently needed to build and maintain infrastructure and improve service quality.

WTA submits that the Tribal Lands Reporting should be deferred at this time, so that the FCC, Tribal governments and carriers serving Tribal lands can determine whether more effective and efficient alternative procedures and reporting requirements can be developed. For example, the major purpose of Tribal Government engagement – the improvement of service and service quality on Tribal lands – can be met in large part by requiring carriers that serve both Tribal and non-Tribal lands to certify that they provide access to telecommunications and information

⁴ Alaska is comprised in major part of Tribal lands, with hundreds of separate governmental authorities. The Tribal Government engagement process imposes a massive burden upon Alaskan carriers, which must now "contact" dozens or hundreds of groups of their customers in addition to dealing with the harsh climate, sparse populations, lack of roads, and other difficulties of serving Alaska.

services on Tribal lands that are reasonably comparable to those provided in their non-Tribal service areas, and that are available at rates that are reasonably comparable to the rates that they change for similar services in their non-Tribal service areas.

The current Tribal Government engagement procedures and reporting are not necessary for the proper performance of the FCC's functions, and will require far more than the four (4) hours per respondent estimated by the Commission.⁵ Setting up and travelling to a single Tribal meeting is likely to take far more than four hours per respondent. WTA has no idea how the FCC estimated the time or cost burdens of Tribal Engagement Reporting, but notes that 4 hours of time and \$40 of cost per hour are unreasonably low for RLECs serving only one Tribal area, and are ridiculously low and inaccurate for RLECs serving multiple Tribal areas.

Given that the FCC has largely ignored the Tribal engagement suggestions of RLECs and other carriers serving Tribal lands, the Office of Management and Budget should review and modify the proposed information requirements on Lines 910 through 929 of FCC Form 481. A more reasonable and realistic approach holds the promise of enhancing the quality, utility, and clarity of the information collected; of minimizing the information collection burdens imposed upon RLECs; and of freeing up more RLEC resources to extend and improve service on Tribal lands.

Conclusion

WTA requests that the Five-Year Plan requirement on Line 100 be eliminated for RLECs, and that RLEC reporting regarding compliance with Section 254(e) of the Act focus upon their use of high-cost support for costs incurred two years previously to improve their service coverage, capacity and quality; and to maintain affordable local service rates. In

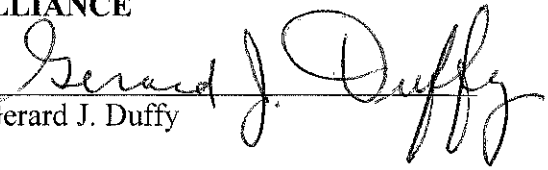
⁵ Supporting Statement, 3060-0986, June 2013, p. 15.

addition, WTA requests that the Tribal Engagement Reporting be deferred at this time, so that the FCC, Tribal governments and carriers serving Tribal lands can develop more effective and efficient alternative procedures and reporting requirements for improving service on Tribal lands.

Blooston, Mordkofsky, Dickens,
Duffy & Prendergast, LLP
2120 L Street, NW (Suite 300)
Washington, DC 20037
Phone: (202) 659-0830
Facsimile: (202) 828-5568
Email: gjd@bloostonlaw.com

Respectfully submitted,

**WESTERN TELECOMMUNICATIONS
ALLIANCE**

By 
Gerard J. Duffy

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