

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
Information Collection Being Submitted For)	81 Fed. Reg. 95138
Review And Approval To The Office Of)	OMB Control No. 3060-0986
Management And Budget (OMB))	

**COMMENTS
OF
NTCA–THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION**

NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association (“NTCA”)¹ hereby submits these comments in response to the Notice of Information Collection (“Notice”)² regarding the Paperwork Reduction Act (“PRA”)³ burdens arising out of the amendment of the FCC Form 481 information collection first adopted by the Federal Communications Commission (“Commission”) in November 2011.⁴

As an initial matter, NTCA requests that the Commission publicly release the draft of the amended Form 481 before taking any further action, including submission to the Office of Management and Budget (“OMB”) for PRA approval. It is true that Eligible Telecommunication Carriers (“ETCs”) subject to the requirement to file Form 481 have access to previous versions of said form and can review previous Commission Orders – in particular, the March 2016 *Rate-*

¹ NTCA represents approximately 850 independent, community-based telecommunications companies and cooperatives and more than 400 other firms that support or are themselves engaged in the provision of communications services in the most rural portions of America. All of NTCA’s service provider members are full service rural local exchange carriers (“RLECs”) and broadband providers, and many provide fixed and mobile wireless, video, satellite and other competitive services in rural America as well.

² Information Collection(s) Being Submitted for Review and Approval To The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), 81 Fed. Reg. 95138 (published Dec. 27, 2016).

³ Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, Public Law No. 104-13, 109 Stat. 163 (May 22, 1995), *codified at* 44 U.S.C. §3501, *et seq.*

⁴ *See, Connect America Fund*, WC Docket No. 10-90, et al., Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, FCC 11-161 (rel. Nov. 18, 2011) (“*USF/ICC Transformation Order*”); *Connect America Fund*, et al., WC Docket No. 10-90, et al., Report and Order, Order and Order on Reconsideration, and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, FCC 16-33 (rel. March 30, 2016) (“*Rate-of-Return Reform Order*”).

of-Return Reform Order – and thus can attempt to divine the amendments for which the Commission will seek PRA approval from the OMB. However, greater transparency in the form of access to the draft Form 481 now, prior to its submission to the OMB, would help ensure that the form encompasses only the data necessary to effectuate the purpose of the information collection. Such a result would ensure that the amended Form 481 limits any unnecessary reporting burdens on the small providers that NTCA represents and eliminates the possibility that the Commission will need to amend the form again after its submission to the OMB should that agency find the form to be too burdensome.

That said, NTCA offers herein suggestions intended to ensure that the amended Form 481 strikes a reasonable balance between necessary accountability and the burden on small rate-of-return carriers. First and foremost, NTCA was pleased that the Commission in the *Rate-of-Return Reform Order* eliminated the requirement that rural carrier ETCs file five-year service quality improvement plans and subsequent annual progress reports.⁵ The adoption in the *Rate-of-Return Reform Order* of location and performance based company-specific buildout obligations⁶ – coupled with the annual requirement to geocode and enter into the Universal Service Administration Company (‘USAC’) online “portal” locations “newly served” – renders the five-year plans entirely moot. NTCA and the small businesses it represents will be quite pleased when the updated draft Form 481 that has eliminated this requirement is publicly available, as the elimination of the requirement should reduce these small carriers’ reporting burdens – or at least offset any increased burdens associated with the portal reporting that replaces the plan preparation and filing.

⁵ *Rate-of-Return Reform Order*, ¶ 205.

⁶ ¶¶ 29-60 and 156-180.

In addition, the Commission can take an immediate step to further reduce the burden of Form 481 by eliminating certain categories of financial data that filers must submit in addition to audited financial statements. Financial data captured by, for example, “Telecommunications Plant in Service” or “Revenues” in the Financial Data Summary section of Form 481 are unlikely to provide the Commission with a more complete or accurate window into RLECs’ financial operations or their use of High Cost Universal Service Fund (“USF”) support than is already provided by an audited financial statement. A number of NTCA members report that they employ only a single employee for the purposes of regulatory compliance with items such as Form 481. Any effort on the part of the Commission to reduce reporting requirements that are duplicative of others – such as the Financial Data Summary or others – could free up ETCs’ limited staff resources and would therefore be a welcome change as well as entirely consistent with the PRA.

Respectfully submitted,



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February 27, 2017