



National Congress of American Indians

NCAI News

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Update on Telecommunications and Technology Issues

SCIA/Commerce Committee Hold Joint Hearing on Telecommunications in Indian Country – On May 14, the Senate Indian Affairs Committee and Senate Commerce Committee held a joint oversight hearing to examine tribal telecommunications issues. In their opening statements, members from both sides of the aisle – including Senators Campbell (R-CO), McCain (R-AZ), Burns (R-MT), Boxer (D-CA), Craig (R-ID), Inouye (D-HI), and Cleland (D-GA) – acknowledged the disproportionate lack of basic and advanced telecommunications and technology in Indian Country and expressed a desire to address this critical issue.

Witnesses at the hearing included K. Dane Snowden, Chief of the Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Mr. Snowden focused his testimony on the FCC's plans to provide additional outreach on the Lifeline and Link-Up universal service programs and to conduct Indian Telecommunications Training Initiative meetings in targeted regions. (Both of these issues are discussed in more detail later in this update.) Mr. Snowden also stated that the FCC intends to formalize its relationship with tribal governments by creating a single point of entry for tribal governments within the FCC. Mr. Snowden faced tough questioning from Chairman Inouye, particularly regarding delays in granting Eligible Telecommunications Carrier (ETC) status to service providers.

Other witnesses included: Susan Masten, Chairwoman of the Yurok Tribe; Marcia Warren Edelman, President, S.M.E. LLC and former Senior Policy Advisor for Native American Affairs, Department of Commerce; Mike Strand, Executive Vice-President and General Counsel, Montana Independent Telecommunications Systems; John Stanton, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Western Wireless Corporation; and, William Day, Chairman, Culture and Heritage Committee, United South and Eastern Tribes.

Chairwoman Masten testified about the effects of low telephone penetration on her reservation and offered several policy recommendations for improving access, based on the NCAI report "*Connecting Indian Country: Tribally-Driven Telecommunications Policy*," which is available online at www.indiantech.org.

Ms. Edelman provided recommendations to address three main issues: lack of current and accurate information; lack of ongoing coordination of resources; and, lack of investment capital and technical assistance.

Mr. Strand testified about the successful efforts of the Montana Independent Telecommunications Systems to deploy wireline telephone and Internet services to tribal lands in Montana. Mr. Stanton

testified about Western Wireless's cooperative agreement with the Oglala Sioux Tribe to deploy wireless telecommunications services on the Pine Ridge Reservation and urged the Committee to enact legislation to improve the process by which ETC status is granted to carriers.

Mr. Day focused his remarks on issues surrounding tribal sovereignty and the siting of cell phone towers on tribal lands and historic properties.

Witness testimony and streaming video of the entire hearing is available through the Indian Affairs Committee website at <http://www.senate.gov/~scia/nsmainpage.htm>.

FCC Cancels Indian Telecommunications Training Initiative – On April 30, the FCC announced that it has canceled the Indian Telecom Training Initiative (ITTI) conference scheduled for September 2002 due to decreased advance registrations and out of respect for September 11 memorial activities. According to FCC officials, the focus of ITTI will shift from one annual event to a series of interactive workshops among tribes, government agencies and industry addressing telecom issues facing Indian Country. The goal is to encourage partnerships among these groups to improve telecommunications coverage in Indian communities. NCAI has written to the FCC to encourage it to partner early and actively with tribal organizations on conference planning and publicity efforts so that ITTI can continue to play an important role in increasing tribal-business-federal partnerships in the telecommunications arena.

FCC To Launch Lifeline/Link-Up Outreach Campaign – In an April 30 speech by K. Dane Snowden, Chief, Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau, to the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, he stated that, next month the FCC is launching a national outreach program called "Get Connected: Afford-A-Phone," which seeks to increase the numbers of subscribers in the Lifeline and Link-Up programs. Tribes through the country have expressed frustration regarding their local carriers' failure to promote Lifeline and Link-Up to tribal subscribers, while several tribally-owned telephone companies have instituted highly successful outreach programs. NCAI has contacted the FCC to urge it to work directly with NCAI and other organizations to promote these efforts.

NCAI Participates in Launch of Digital Empowerment Campaign – On May 15, NCAI Executive Director Jackie Johnson participated in a press conference at the U.S. Capitol to kick off the "Digital Empowerment Campaign." The Campaign is designed to promote continued federal support for two community technology programs, the Technology Opportunities Program (TOP) and the Community Technology Centers (CTC) program, that the President's FY 2003 budget proposed eliminating. Other participants in the media event included Senators Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) and Cleland (D-GA), and top officials from the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the American Council of the Blind, the National Urban League, and other organizations. More information about the Campaign is available at www.digitalempowerment.org, and streaming video of NCAI's remarks is available at www.indiantech.org.

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