

STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS

RE: Inquiry Regarding Carrier Current Systems, including Power Line Broadband Systems, ET Docket No. 03-104, Notice of Inquiry (adopted Apr. 23, 2003)

We could be making some history here this morning. We could be on the cusp of bringing new competition to the deployment of broadband and doing so via technology with tremendous potential to reach not only the easily reachable, but also our hard-to-reach fellow citizens living in rural areas. Electric power infrastructure is near ubiquitous across the country and turning this asset into a powerful new communications technology could bring huge benefits to all of us. We're not there yet, of course, but just catching a glimpse of what this could mean in terms of the great broadband infrastructure challenge of the 21st Century is exciting. So I strongly support today's NOI, and I applaud the effort to gather information critical to assisting the Commission to play a constructive role in making this a reality without causing problems, such as unacceptable interference, to existing radio devices.

Certainly we need to be quick about the task of gathering data, assessing the technical challenges and developing the requisite measurement procedures.

I believe, however, that it is also time to begin looking at some of the policy implications that we will surely face before power line broadband deployment becomes a reality. The implications of this technology are, in fact, wide-ranging, and to ask commenters to begin exploring how power line communications fit into, or challenge, our existing rules strikes me as both prudent and timely. Important questions include: How do we avoid cross-subsidy from a corporation's regulated energy businesses to its communications business and resulting price hikes for energy customers in non-competitive markets? What are the implications of power line communications to universal service? To rural communications? Are there pole attachment or rights-of-way issues we should address?

I am not suggesting that we need to answer these questions, and I am sure many others, right now. We do not have anywhere near enough information. But I believe that the FCC works best when it tackles the tough questions early on. If we ignore these issues now, we will just be pushing the challenge down the line for another Commission to deal with. And when they face the questions we didn't ask, they will not have the advantage of the time for reflection that we have now.

So I will vote to approve in part and to concur in part, and I look forward to working with the industry, the Bureau and my colleagues to nurture this exciting potential into early reality. It really might be a history-maker.