

Remarks of
Michael K. Powell
Chairman, Federal Communications Commission
at Reception for Tribal Leaders and Representatives
FCC Indian Telecommunications Initiatives Regional Meeting
Rapid City, SD
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(As Prepared for Delivery)

Good afternoon.

Honorable Tribal Leaders and Distinguished Tribal Representatives, it is a pleasure to be here among the peoples of the Great Plains.

I want to begin by thanking the membership of the National Tribal Telecommunications Association for working in cooperation with us to put together tomorrow's Workshop and Roundtable. For years your companies have been active in the Commission's efforts to reach out to Indian Country and in the Commission's proceedings regarding important telecommunications matters affecting Indian Country.

Individually and together, you have an invaluable understanding of what it means to run a telecom business in Indian Country. We appreciate your continued willingness to share that expertise and your commitment to assist the FCC in its efforts to promote telecommunications issues on Indian lands.

Through our Indian Telecommunications Initiatives, we hope to consult with each other, to share and discuss the important issues impacting telecommunications services on Tribal lands in furtherance of our important federal trust responsibilities. Collectively, we are here to acknowledge the important opportunities that telecommunications services can bring to Tribal communities and discuss how we can all work together to make that happen across Indian Country.

Telecommunications is key to unlocking opportunities to improve learning, rural health care, public safety, and the operations of government. Telecommunications can also be used to meet important homeland security and public safety objectives, and to connect elected leaders with the communities they serve. Innovative telecommunications products and services appear almost daily – VoIP, digital TV, smart radio, and wireless applications just to name a few. Indian Country must be a part of this telecommunications revolution.

Information technology and access to telecommunications as a means of economic empowerment is essential to the future growth and increased vitality of Tribal life – bringing significant benefits to Tribal financial, social, political, security, healthcare and educational systems. It is already a reality that a new vibrant generation of Indian youth will graduate from distance learning institutions offering knowledge one once had to leave the Reservation to learn. History teaches us that Tribal cultures have always been highly adaptive societies, and increased access to technology will provide this entrepreneurial spirit greater opportunities at home in Indian Country than ever before.

Broadband connectivity will provide the basis for job opportunities and support diversified economies. Broadband services must come to Indian Country and we must all work together to bring it there.

The FCC is committed to working with Tribes to bring these important telecommunications services to Indian Country. Our ITI program seeks to foster understanding, cooperation and most importantly, trust. Through our ITI efforts, and actions consistent with the principles of Tribal self-governance, we endeavor to develop working relationships with Tribes, consult with Indian Tribes on a government-to-government basis, and solicit their input on the issues we address and the actions we take.

These government-to-government relationships are the foundation for our work in Indian Country to address communications problems, such as low penetration rates and quality of service, historic preservation, and other issues of mutual concern.

To strengthen our understanding of how telecommunications issues impact Indian County, we seek to facilitate Tribal consultation on telecommunications issues that impact Tribal lands. We are all here in Rapid City to engage in consultation through our workshop and roundtable discussions. We also aim to streamline administrative procedures to identify and, to the extent authorized by law, remove undue administrative and organizational impediments that our decisions and actions may place on Indian Tribes.

Internally, to increase our collective knowledge, we are educating Commission staff about Tribal governments and Tribal cultures, sovereignty rights, Indian law, and Tribal communications needs. We also are working cooperatively with other Federal departments and agencies, as well as Tribal, State and local governments to further our goals, and we incorporate all of these aims into our long-term planning and management activities, including policy development processes and management accountability systems.

Working together -- American Indian Tribes and Tribal organizations, the telecommunications industry and the FCC -- we can tackle the difficult issue of increasing access to critical telecommunications services, and improving the quality of life and opportunities, in Indian Country.

With our Regional Roundtables and Workshops we hope to achieve a level of meaningful discussion and genuine understanding that will foster valuable working relationships as we work together to address critical telecommunications issues facing communities throughout Indian Country. These are the goals of all our ITI efforts, and we have learned much in developing these relationships.

Our outreach efforts and work with inter-tribal organizations, such as the United South and Eastern Tribes, the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, and the National Congress of American Indians has given us both national and regional perspectives of Tribes, their common interests and concerns. Our travel to meet with Tribes on their own lands and in their own institutions has taught us the individual challenges and unique needs Tribes face in their communities and governments. Throughout the FCC's visits to Indian Country, we have seen how dedicated and resourceful Tribes have developed innovative applications and business plans to address their specific needs.

One of the accomplishments I am most proud of involves the FCC's work with the United South and Eastern Tribes to help bring wireless services to Indian Country, while ensuring adequate protection of properties of religious and cultural importance to Tribes. Through our efforts, the FCC and USET signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) committing our two organizations to continue our joint efforts to create a set of Best Practices that will serve as guidance to the FCC, industry, and Tribes on how to work together in the tower construction and historic preservation process.

These Best Practices are being developed in the truest sense of the government-to-government relationship – across the table from each other, shirt sleeves rolled up and pens in hand tackling difficult issues in a mutually respectful manner. When we found good common ground we opened the discussion to include members of the wireless and tower construction industries, who have a vested interest in working with all parties. NCAI has also become involved to help us learn how the Best Practices may ultimately be utilized to benefit other areas of Indian Country as well.

I want to note that the MoU that President Keller George of USET and I signed marked a significant event in the history of the FCC. It is the first agreement of its kind that the Commission has entered into with American Indian Tribes. Here today, I again offer my highest commendation to USET for its outstanding leadership and dedication to this process.

To the National Congress of American Indians I say your presence is most welcome on this matter so close to the heart of all of Indian Country—Cultural Preservation. The Tribes have my firm and unyielding commitment to devote the staff and the resources of the agency to completing this important task. This work serves as a model for future work with the Tribes and I am committed to building on this foundation in the years to come.

Recently, I personally had the pleasure of seeing how the Southern California Tribal Chairman's Association has deployed innovative wireless technologies to connect their Tribal government and members through a virtual Tribal Digital Village. In addition, members of my staff were guests of the Hopi Tribe on their reservation in Arizona last summer and I enjoyed learning that this past April the Hopi Tribal Council authorized the creation of Hopi Telecommunications, Inc. They hope to be the newest Tribally-owned and operated telecommunications company, one of several options Tribes can consider in bringing services to their communities. Another Tribal Nation that FCC staff has worked closely with as Tribal officials have considered many service options and plans over the past year is the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe.

Our responsibilities and interest in working with Indian Country extends not only to Tribal government and business institutions, but also to the citizens and residents of these lands. Earlier this week staff from the Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau held a consumer forum with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to meet, learn and discuss the concerns of community members regarding their services and the role of the FCC in addressing inquiries from Tribal consumers. Staff also had an opportunity to visit the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Telephone Authority and Lakota Technologies, Inc. to see how they have leveraged Tribal mandates, federal programs and entrepreneurial zeal to provide not just service, but jobs and real economic opportunities to their people. This commitment to come to Indian Country provides a valuable learning experience for Commission staff.

Over the past few years, Commissioners and FCC staff have traveled from the Alaska villages to the Great Basin, from the Southwest Canyons and Mesas to the Plateaus of the Northwest. We have taken the FCC on the road and as we come again here to the Great Plains we are listening and learning. During this same time, we have engaged in more consultation on FCC regulatory matters and spent more time in Indian Country than ever before. I am pleased to say that we are seeing the benefits of these efforts – through greater Tribal input and collaboration than ever before. I thank you for your hospitality and for your insight.

Earlier this year we received an honor for our efforts to listen to what you have to say. It came from the national Tribal organization with which we have perhaps coordinated the longest, NCAI. In February, the NCAI honored us with their Leadership Award “for demonstrating exemplary commitment to the honorable exercise of the government-to-government relationship through meaningful outreach and consultation with Indian Tribes.”

I wish to recognize that the First Vice-President of NCAI, Council Member Joe Garcia of San Juan Pueblo and NCAI Telecommunications Associate Adam Bailey are here with us today. This award is a distinction that we will strive to live up to in every part of our work at the Commission. Indian Country is our partner and we will continue to listen and learn as we ensure that all Americans, including American Indians and Alaska Natives, have access to the telecommunications infrastructures of this great nation.

In our consultations and Tribal outreach efforts we have learned that consultation does not end with the conclusion of any one conversation, but rather it is an open, enduring discourse on how a federal agency and Tribal governments can continually work together – through issues and challenges, sharing information and assisting each other to find meaningful answers and achieve common objectives. We are happy to be here again in the Great Plains working together, in the spirit of our unique relationship. Through this mutually respectful trust relationship, we know that we can and will achieve our critical objectives.

I’m honored to be with you this evening. Thank you.

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