

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER KATHLEEN Q. ABERNATHY**

*Re: Effects of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Services in the Gulf Coast
States (September 15, 2005)*

Yesterday I had the opportunity to see firsthand unprecedented catastrophe and the often underappreciated strength of the human spirit. The utter devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina is unimaginable if you have not seen it, and unbelievable if you have. And yet the people who have lost everything remain unbroken.

I also witnessed the unparalleled effort being made by every segment of the telecommunications industry not only to restore workable telecommunications service to the areas Katrina ravaged, but also to provide shelter, food and other basic necessities to people in need.

I want to thank the witnesses who appeared today. They have attempted to describe the sheer magnitude of the loss and devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina -- but of course words are inadequate. They also have described the immensity of the challenges they faced in the first hours and days after the storm, and the ongoing efforts to rebuild and restore service over the coming months.

Not only have telecommunications companies risen to the challenge by deploying every resource available to restore service to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, but even more impressively, these erstwhile competitors have put aside their normal rivalries and pooled their resources in creative responses to the catastrophe. Radio broadcasters like Entercom and Clear Channel, and TV broadcasters like Belo and Hearst-Argyll, devoted countless hours covering the onslaught of Katrina, and then shared their surviving facilities to assure that local coverage of the storm and its aftermath was available not just over-the-air, but also on the Internet and by satellite. Satellite carriers such as Iridium and MSV provided satellite phones that served as the only means of communication in the first harrowing hours after wireline and wireless connections were lost. Wireline phone provider SBC deployed technicians and equipment to help BellSouth rebuild its network in Louisiana. BellSouth worked intensively with wireless carriers to restore wireless service, and wireless carriers helped one another through spectrum sharing, roaming arrangements, and even the sharing of fuel and trucks. Companies like ITC^Deltacom made fiber optic capacity available to insure continued communications into and out of the affected areas, and VoIP providers deployed wide-area wireless networks for use by fire, rescue, and law enforcement agencies. Taken together, these and other cooperative efforts have enabled both the rescuers and the rescued to hear the latest news, find and treat survivors, locate loved ones, and take the first steps on the road to recovery.

In a number of instances, companies partnered with police and first responders to facilitate search-and-rescue efforts. Cingular, for example, not only provided food, shelter, and basic necessities for their own employees, but they also reached out to the police, local hospitals and the National Guard. They provided fuel for police cars, generators for hospitals, and food and shelter for first responders. They are not alone in demonstrating an open heart.

Other telecom companies took decisive and often innovative steps to keep displaced residents and businesses in touch with friends, family members, suppliers, and customers. BellSouth established call centers at emergency shelters throughout the region, waived charges associated with establishing service at new locations, and offered features such as voice mail and call forwarding at no cost for a full month. Verizon provided mobile payphone trailers, phone banks, and free prepaid calling cards for use by all displaced residents. And Verizon Wireless alone provided 10,000 free wireless devices. Carriers also provided priority network access to public safety personnel. Microwave links are being used to overcome obstacles created by damaged wireline networks. Unlicensed technologies, such as ultra-wideband, are assisting and facilitating search and rescue efforts. At the same time, wireless carriers have agreed to defer normal billing and collection activities during this crisis and have agreed not to disconnect services to affected customers for nonpayment of bills.

Unfortunately I lack the time to mention by name all of the carriers, broadcasters, cable TV and high-tech companies who responded to this disaster. All of them deserve our recognition and our thanks, not simply because of what they are doing, but because of why they are doing it. Their sense of urgency is a tangible recognition of the fact that the ability to live our daily lives as we wish depends, in large measure, on the availability of radio, television, wireline, and wireless telecommunications. The sooner these resources are repaired and redeployed, the sooner we will be able to restore economic security and well-being to the residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. That is what we all seek to achieve, and that's why our meeting today to hear about these efforts is so very important.

But there is another dimension to today's meeting as well. As we learn about what industry has done to cope with this disaster, we need to explore what the private sector, local and state authorities, and the Commission can do on a going-forward basis to assure more timely restoration of service when faced with natural or man-made calamities in the future.

In doing this we need to be mindful of what government must do, and what private industry can do better without government mandates or micromanagement. The innovative partnerships that have been developed in response to the unprecedented destruction of Hurricane Katrina demonstrate the industry's tremendous resiliency and expertise in rebuilding its infrastructure.

It may well be that in the mutual cooperation of telecommunications companies today we will find a template for improved interindustry cooperation in the future. And it is likely that the FCC can materially facilitate the establishment of such arrangements by standardizing and simplifying our own processes so that less work needs to be done on the fly when we are faced with similar emergencies in the future. In a day and age of perpetual heightened alert, we owe the American people no less.

Having said all this, I would be remiss if I did not point out that the very reason we are able to explore such measures today is the fact that Chairman Martin and the FCC staff reacted to the extensive devastation of the communications infrastructure with clear, focused outreach to each and every segment of the industry affected – asking what they needed, providing any

authorization or coordination necessary, and actively working with federal, state, and local officials to get service back on-line as quickly as possible. The Chairman, and the FCC staff under his direction, have worked literally around-the-clock to do everything within the Commission's power to help restore a semblance of normalcy to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. For that, and for giving us the possibility of building on these efforts to make things better in the future, I thank them.