

STATEMENT
COMMISSIONER ROBERT M. McDOWELL

RE: Rural Health Care Support Mechanism Order – WC Docket No. 02-60

My congratulations to the Chairman on his leadership on this thoughtful and creative proposal to make more effective the Rural Health Care program. And congratulations to the Wireline Competition Bureau and OSP in preparing these revisions to the program.

Advanced healthcare should be available to all Americans, regardless of whether they live in rural or urban areas. Congress has mandated that the Commission enhance the availability of advanced telecommunications and information services for rural health care providers. This program in its current form has been underutilized, however.

In light of these factors, we should take all steps necessary to make sure that our statutory mandate is fulfilled, so that rural health care providers have access to the most current and advanced health care information and services. This becomes particularly critical when considering the possibility of a nationwide, and even worldwide, flu pandemic.

This two-year pilot project provides a vehicle to determine the extent of the need for advanced services to meet the rural health care objective and how we can tailor the rural health care support mechanism toward that end. It also gives new options for developing regional, state and national networks dedicated to health care.

Several protections are important to incorporate into the pilot project: One is that the program is competitively and technologically neutral. The other is that the broadband networks being funded be built to include service to rural areas.

Therefore, Mr. Chairman, I support this item and look forward to the positive results of this pilot project.