

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER ROBERT M. McDOWELL**

Office of Native Affairs and Policy 2012 Annual Report

March 20, 2013

Geoff and Irene, thanks to you and your entire team for your very informative review of the Office of Native Affairs and Policy (“ONAP”) 2012 Annual Report. Your diligence in ensuring that the voices of Native Americans, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians are heard in every corner of this building and beyond is appreciated. I am also pleased that Senator Udall was able to speak before us today. His interest in expanding communications services on Tribal lands has been commendable. Finally, I thank the honorable Tribal and Alaska Native representatives who are joining us today. Your ideas are incredibly valuable, and I hope that you have found the Commission to be helpful.

One of the first photographs in today’s presentation caught my eye: a picture of an Alaska Native Village. That picture reminds me of my first trip as a commissioner. I travelled to Alaska in August of 2006 specifically to visit the lands of Alaska Natives and learn about their unique challenges. Subsequently, I have visited several other Tribal lands. The picture also reminds me of the Commission’s efforts in 2008 to control spiking costs and impose a spending cap on competitive eligible telecommunications carrier access to high-cost universal service support. Although the purpose of the cap was to control the growth of the fund, which I supported overall, I found it important to support a narrow exception to the cap for providers serving Tribal lands throughout our nation, including Alaska, where telephone service and broadband deployment rates have been extremely low compared to other areas of our nation.

Years later, in 2011, as part of our comprehensive reform of the universal service high-cost fund, the Commission established a separate fund to encourage mobile service on Tribal lands. I am interested in learning more about how implementation of the Tribal Mobility Fund is progressing. In addition to addressing the unique circumstances of Tribal lands as part of universal service reforms, I was also pleased to support the Commission’s efforts in the past couple years to encourage radio service to areas served by American Indian Tribes, Alaska Native Villages and tribal consortia.

Separately, while at the Commission, I have routinely sought ways to remove unnecessary regulations and, in particular, I have noted the importance of identifying rules that are barriers to the expansion of communications services on Tribal lands. Providers currently serving, or seeking to serve, these areas of the country face many unique challenges – including difficult terrain, extreme climates and remoteness. The Commission should be finding ways to enable these providers’ efforts rather than adding to their burdens.

There is much more work to be done in this area, and I hope that all stakeholders can continue to find ways to work together in a productive manner.