

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRMAN TOM WHEELER**

Re: *Improvements to Benchmarks and Related Requirements Governing Hearing Aid-Compatible Mobile Handsets*, WT Docket No. 15-285

When it comes to communications technology, accessibility should be a first thought, not an afterthought. This is the smart thing to do, because it is more cost-effective to incorporate accessibility features early in the design process. More important, it is the right thing to do, because it ensures equal accessibility for Americans with hearing loss.

One area where the Commission has made significant progress in making sure accessibility is baked into new technology is hearing aid compatibility (HAC) for new mobile devices. Today, we take another step toward the day when Americans with hearing loss can access the same range of wireless handsets as anybody else.

Until last year, the Commission's hearing-aid-compatibility rules were focused on handsets used with traditional cellular networks and only required accessibility for a subset of devices.

In November 2015, the Commission unanimously adopted an order to update and "future proof" these rules. The order applied HAC requirements broadly to wireless voice communication services, including Wi-Fi calling, VoLTE, software-based calling "apps", as well as technologies that may develop in the future.

We also sought comment on a proposal, developed jointly and cooperatively by consumer groups and industry representatives that set a goal of 100 percent compatibility for new handsets and a roadmap for how to get there. Today's order will enshrine that groundbreaking consensus plan.

Today's order will eventually eliminate the "fractional benchmark" system under which only a percentage of wireless handset models must comply with the HAC rules.

The new rules will move us in stages toward 100 percent compatibility within eight years, setting forth the following benchmarks:

- After two years, 66 percent of device models offered by manufacturers must be compliant, with additional compliance time for service providers.
- After five years, 85 percent offered by manufacturers must comply, with additional time for service providers.

There are some manufacturers and service providers that already meet the benchmarks, but, for those that do not, the benchmarks will set the floor higher for all manufacturers and service providers. As a result, these new benchmarks should increase the total number of hearing-aid-compatible handsets available to consumers with hearing loss even before the move to 100 percent compatibility and will help ensure that everyone stays on track to reach our ultimate goal. In addition, the Report and Order also provides that, in meeting our benchmarks, service providers may legally rely on handset information contained in manufacturers' Form 655 filings.

In pursuing 100 percent compliance, we encourage stakeholders to keep us informed about evolutions in technology and market conditions that impact hearing aid compatibility. We will call on stakeholders to help us determine whether the 100 percent HAC-compliance goal is achievable. To be clear, we expect to require 100 percent compliance.

These additional updates to our hearing-aid-compatibility rules will greatly expand options for people with hearing loss, simplify the task of finding handsets that work with hearing aids and ensure that people with hearing loss have full access to innovative handsets. We appreciate the time, effort, and expertise that the stakeholders devoted to this achievement, and we hope it can serve as a model for collaborative problem solving in other area in the future.