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STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL,
APPROVING IN PART, DISSENTING IN PART

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Re: *Establishing a 5G Fund for Rural America*, GN Docket No. 20-32, WT Docket No. 10-208, Report and Order (October 27, 2020)

A year ago, I had the privilege of crisscrossing the roads of West Virginia with Senator Joe Manchin. Although the leaves were at their seasonal peak, we weren't there to take in the views. We were there to talk to residents of the Mountain State about what it's like to live without broadband, in places where wireless signals are scarce. These are not communities without 5G, they are communities with no G. But if you look at the maps we have at the Federal Communications Commission, you might be surprised. More often than not—in West Virginia and elsewhere—they don't get it right. They suggest wireless service is available when it's not. They say signals are strong when the lived experience of those who reside there will very clearly and quickly tell you otherwise.

The truth is that this agency has known for years that its maps need serious attention but unfortunately, we have little to show for it. This is especially true when it comes to wireless service. In fact, the situation is so bad that Senator Manchin himself filed to protest the state of our maps in our last go-around to determine where to send support to extend the reach of wireless service to rural communities, known as Mobility Fund II. He wasn't alone. Lots of other challengers filed similar protests pointing out how we got it wrong. In fact, together they filed so much material about errors in our data that this year the agency threw in the towel on Mobility Fund II and started anew—which brings us to the new 5G fund before us.

Let's start with the positive. The agency saw clearly that without good mapping data, it couldn't have confidence its universal service funds for wireless communications would be deployed in the communities that need them most. So today we commit to a new course for wireless universal service support that will ensure we have accurate data and better maps before we commit billions in support. This is the right thing to do. Moreover, it's striking that we insist on maps before money and data before deployment with wireless universal service because when it comes to wired universal service this agency has inexplicably run in the other direction. In fact, just days from now the agency will begin a $16 billion auction for wired services—representing 80% of our funds for the next decade—without first seeking accurate data or better maps. In contrast, the course we choose today is responsible and smart.

But here's the not-so-positive. We're building this auction without grounding it in any real-world data. That's because we are still slow-rolling efforts to fix our maps and in fact, we just missed a key deadline under the Broadband DATA Act. We can't afford to wait longer, we need to find some way to make at least some progress now. Because we need that data to help inform the choices we make about how this auction operates, what speeds it requires, and what build-out it compels. We need that data to know what communities lack wireless service and how much reaching them will truly cost. But instead, we're building the ship and setting sail while the compass is still on backorder.

So many of the choices we make here would benefit from more data and more thinking. For instance, we determine that wireless bidders will have to offer service in 85% of any area won at auction. Why not 100%? What facts support anything less than truly universal service? Today we also determine speed obligations for the next decade—what study has been done to show that this threshold won't be outdated before the auction even begins? We also set aside funds for precision agriculture projects. What data supports the amount selected? How will this effort work in concert with the initial phase of 5G support we commit to today? And what facts support that budget? The answers are less than clear because so many of the choices we make here are not grounded in data.

So while I support today's decision to commit to a wireless future that is supported by more accurate maps, I think a little more humility would serve us well. The framework we have is sound, but the details would benefit from more data-gathering before we proceed. So I think this effort needs some work if

we want to make sure wireless signals reach those roads in West Virginia where I traveled and every other place in the United States. For these reasons, I approve in part, and dissent in part.

One final note. Even when I disagree, I appreciate the speed and enthusiasm with which this agency is developing broadband initiatives to improve deployment in rural communities stuck on the wrong side of the digital divide. But I am gobsmacked at our failure to attend to the other half of the digital divide—and that's adoption. Remember that three to four times as many households outside of rural areas have no broadband at home. But we have no new initiatives, no new funding proposals, no new policies to address the millions of children locked out of the virtual classroom. This cruel pandemic has revealed the hard truth that our nation's digital divide is very real and very big. It's time for a greater sense of urgency in every way to fix it.