

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *Protecting Against National Security Threats to the Communications Supply Chain Through FCC Programs*, WC Docket No. 18-89.

Today's Order marks another significant milestone in our effort to eliminate untrustworthy equipment from America's communications networks. Though our work is far from complete, I want to take this opportunity to reflect on how far we have come over the last two years. We faced unprecedented challenges when I convened the *Find It, Fix It, Fund It* workshop in June 2019—from understanding the scope of the problem in U.S. networks, to developing solutions for the threats posed by Huawei and ZTE equipment, to implementing a complex removal and replacement process.

At the *Find It, Fix It, Fund It* workshop, we heard from a broad cross-section of experts, including a number of small carriers. At the time, funding posed a daunting challenge. I remember hearing Christopher Reno, Director of Accounting at Union Telephone, walk through the costs for equipment, software, installation, and optimization needed to offer mobile service across sometimes challenging terrain. Reno explained that the “extraordinary expense” associated with a rip-and-replace solution is something Union and other smaller carriers just “could not bear.”

I am grateful that Congress has empowered us to drive execution with \$1.895 billion in funding. The reimbursement plan we adopt today will, consistent with congressional instructions, prioritize smaller carriers and establish an orderly process for getting those funds out to operators. This is very good news.

But that does not mean the road ahead will be easy. When I checked in with the team at Union Telephone again last week, they outlined the challenges they face in replacing insecure equipment, even with financial support. Some of those difficulties, such as a relatively short construction season limited by severe weather and delays in permitting for federal lands, are perennial concerns facing carriers that serve some of the hardest-to-reach parts of our country. Others—including increased costs for steel and concrete and shortages of qualified workers—likely stem from the turmoil that the coronavirus pandemic has caused in many sectors of our economy. Pine Belt Cellular's President John Nettles, another *Find It, Fix It, Fund It* workshop participant, underscored those concerns in conversation with my office this week. For many smaller carriers, he explained, changes to their networks have been in a holding pattern for some time. Now that federal funding is on its way, there is a lot of work to be done.

Recognizing those challenges, the Order clarifies the factors the Wireline Competition Bureau will consider in evaluating individual extensions of time for the removal, replacement, and disposal of untrustworthy equipment. I thank my colleagues for adding language noting the availability of extensions for companies facing delays in federal permitting processes. Moving forward, the Commission should consider how we can alert our federal partners at the permitting agencies, including the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. National Park Service, to the national security imperative for an expedited replacement process.

Finally, as we applaud our country's progress toward more secure communications, we must also remember that many of our international partners are still navigating the process of identifying the untrustworthy equipment in their networks and setting out a plan to address the threat. We know that communications don't stop at the water's edge. Global security requires international cooperation. The United States can and should continue to lead by example and offer technical assistance to our allies.

As I have done many times over the last two years, I would like to again thank the numerous Commission staff members who have devoted years to this challenging and sensitive work. Assessing threats posed by untrustworthy equipment, working with affected carriers, and building a firm legal and factual foundation for the path forward have all required expertise and dedication. I am pleased to approve this Order, and I look forward to working with my FCC colleagues to get reimbursement funds into the field as quickly as possible.