

## COMMISSIONER NATHAN SIMINGTON REMARKS AT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FARM BROADCASTERS

Wednesday, November 16, 2022

Thank you to Brian and Tom for the kind invitation to speak with you all.

You know, I had half a mind to quote Paul Harvey's *So God Made a Farmer* in my remarks today. I'm sure that most of you are aware, but for those of you who are not: Paul Harvey is a famous radio broadcaster who hosted several radio programs—perhaps, most famously, “The **Rest** of the Story.” Harvey delivered his piece, *So God Made a Farmer*, to a rapt FFA audience in 1978.

I won't, for a few reasons. First: Harvey's style is totally inimitable—beyond the capabilities of mere mortals like me. Second: as it turns out, then-Commissioner, later Chairman Pai already referenced the speech in his comments to the NAFB back in 2015, and I don't want to be accused of plagiarizing—though I bet he'd give me a pass. But lastly, I think I enjoy a perspective on farm broadcasting that is, if not fully unique to the Commission, at least rare among recent Commissioners.

You see, I grew up on a farm—a century farm in Saskatchewan, Canada, where my family raised durum, wheat, mustard, canola, chickpeas, and lentils. We grew up reading the trades. Commodity prices in the ag markets were not just something abstract for us; they were our figurative, and literal, daily bread. And besides the trade papers, there was no media institution more trusted to inform us about all we needed to know than AM radio.

AM radio was for us then, and is for the more than three million farmers across the US now, an indispensable resource. AM radio broadcasts keep us informed about the weather—a topic of perhaps unique concern to farmers. And not just weather, but weather emergencies—AM radio is the essential spine of the Emergency Alert System, and I hardly have to tell a Kansas City audience how important information about the track of tornadoes is. AM radio lets you know what's happening not just globally, but locally—from school closures and traffic delays to city council and county management meetings and high school sports games. And sometimes, where *you* live? Well, because of the way it propagates, AM radio might be all that comes in.

There are those who say that AM radio is a dead technology. It's a relic of a different era, supplanted now by new technologies. They say that the Commission should reallocate the band to a different use—well. Okay. Let's play that out. A dead technology? Don't tell farmers that. Most farmers listen to AM radio. Three quarters listen to radio five days per week. Sure, they read the trades and they watch ag TV—but more listen to radio, daily, than read or watch either of those sources. And of those listening to radio every day? More than 60 percent are listening to AM sources. Most folks listen more than an hour per day, and one in five listens to more than two hours per day. And, perhaps most importantly: farm broadcasters, especially those using AM, are a trusted source of information. Forget about oil or gas—these days, *trust* is the hottest commodity.

And what's the plan to serve rural farmers with the information that they need, exactly, if not for AM radio? What's the plan to get a receivable signal into the middle of a field thirty miles from town? The FM band's all full up, even when the signal doesn't attenuate. Satellite's a good option, but an expensive one. That dollar is better spent on your groceries. AM radio is not just free, but we've built a lot of important emergency signaling infrastructure into it. No, the best option is to preserve this vital asset for those who use it, including, I think, most of you.

So how do we preserve it? Well, there are a few ways. First: we can stop crushing radio with regulatory fees. Folks, look, our regulatory fee system is a mess. This is an open secret in Washington. It's really hard to change, but we have to do it. And, let me be clear: this isn't new. Democrat and Republican chairs alike have presided over our system of regulatory fees, and no one has really cracked this nut. There are a couple of reasons for it—one, the alternatives can be difficult to implement. Two, we have a statute that dictating how we should collect regulatory fees that has historically been interpreted in a way that created our current system. Three, well, Congress, until recently, hasn't been paying a lot of attention. But that changed, I think, with the recent letter-writing campaign over broadcast regulatory fees. I think broadcasters got their attention.

So, let's try to keep that ball rolling. Let's call on Congress to revamp the way we collect regulatory fees—a methodology that is fairer and more accurate. A methodology that reflects the work that staff at the Commission actually do. Because let me tell you, there's no way that you folks should be paying eight percent more in regulatory fees—in this year of all years. I don't think you got eight percent more attention.

Second: we can encourage auto manufacturers to double down on AM reception. Look, people listen to radio in their cars or trucks—particularly rural radio. That's just how it is. And if people lose the ability to tune into AM on their cars, well, there goes AM radio. Now, the Commission doesn't have a direct look-in into auto manufacturers. We don't regulate them. But we do regulate spectrum, and, increasingly, auto makers have spectrum asks for the Commission. The next generation of autonomous cars and trucks, exciting as it is, will rely critically on spectrum for sensing and steering technologies. The Commission should not be shy about asking auto manufacturers to serve the public interest by continuing to serve AM radio listeners, just as the Commission helps the auto industry to make possible the next generation of innovation in automotive technology.

I've heard some suggest that electric vehicles actually wind up mitigating radio reception. I'm going to level with you folks: I don't know whether that's true. Suffice it to say that it's on our radar, and it's a topic that the Commission should, at some point, investigate further.

Third: let's face it. AM radio is big in rural areas, but less big elsewhere. Among those who listen to terrestrial radio, fewer than one in five listen to the AM band. Why is that? Well, a part of it is just an economic trend toward other forms of listening. And there isn't a whole lot that we can do about that, and maybe we shouldn't try. We aren't in the business of squelching new technologies. But are we in the business of squelching mature industries? Sometimes it can seem that way. What do I mean?

Well, how hard is it to get a good AM signal? Actually not that hard. Head out there yourself with a spectrum analyzer and see. Now, how hard is it to get good AM *reception*? Well, that's a different story, and I don't want to give an oversimplified answer. Some of it has to do with the narrowness of band filters in AM radios; some of it has to do with the size of the carrier signal and how much audio information can be pulled out; some of it has to do with ionospheric propagation across long distances, especially at night; and some of it has to do with power levels. What I would not propose to do here is a technical solution to the problem – I am not a radio engineer. What I *would* propose is that the Commission have a critical look at AM radio reception on a technical level, continuing in the spirit of Chairman Pai's great work in AM revitalization.

Lastly, departing from AM for just a moment to talk about FM—although I expect many in the audience operate FM repeaters for their AM stations—we've been giving some thought in my office to the idea of opening FM chips for mobile devices. This isn't a new idea, of course. The Commission has been, in some form or another, asking phone manufacturers to “turn on” their FM chips in the US for years. I think it isn't that simple. A chip capable of receiving FM is not the same as a chip poised to receive FM—various other apparatuses are necessary. But it is my hope that as some phone manufacturers do build this capability into their devices—especially across the global market—and as the broadcast industry deepens its relationship with data networks as datacasting is rolled out as an ancillary method for serving data to consumers, that broadcasters and device manufacturers alike might begin to see activated FM chips with fully built-out reception capabilities as in one another's mutual interest.

We need farm broadcasters. We need each one of you. We need farm broadcasters to keep us informed of ag market futures and cattle auctions. We need farm broadcasters when the weather turns or a fire breaks out to provide to-the-minute updates on where to go and what to do. We need farm broadcasters in good times to celebrate our local victories, on the field and off. We need you for not only all of the work that you do, but for all of the work that you make possible.

Thank you again for the kind invitation to join you today.