

**STATEMENT OF  
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS,  
APPROVING IN PART, CONCURRING IN PART**

Re: *Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service; Promoting Deployment and Subscribership in Unserved and Underserved Areas, Including Tribal and Insular Areas*

Three years ago, the Commission adopted an official policy statement to guide interactions between the agency and tribal governments. For the first time in its history, the Commission formally affirmed the principles of tribal sovereignty and federal trust responsibility. The Commission committed to consult with tribal governments before taking action affecting tribal land and resources and committed to address persistent communications problems like low penetration in Indian communities.

Although I support the Order we adopt today, I concur in part because I fear that our Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking falls short of the vision and commitment expressed in our official policy statement. For the second time in three years, we seek comment on how the Commission can ensure that tribal members living *near* tribal lands can benefit from the same enhanced Lifeline and Link Up available to those living *on* tribal lands. As the Commission already has recognized, lands adjacent to reservations have been considered tribal lands for purposes of other federal programs targeted to federally-recognized Indian tribes. Many of these near reservation areas share the same high rates of poverty, low telephone subscribership and geographic isolation found on tribal lands. Moreover, rates of unemployment on tribal lands of 20 and 30 and 40 percent often compel members to move off reservations to adjacent areas where job prospects are brighter. I understand that the Commission's prior definition of near reservation inadvertently included highly populated urban areas not targeted for enhanced support. Nonetheless, I believe that it is high time for the Commission to choose an appropriate limiting principle for near reservation areas and resolve this issue once and for all.

By seeking another round of comment we only further delay enhancing tribal communities' access to telecommunications. As a result, we delay these same communities' access to education, commerce, government and public services. Native Americans should not be the last Americans to reap the benefits of the Information Age. We need to work harder to honor the commitment we made in our policy statement to address low penetration rates in Indian Country. I remain hopeful that in this proceeding we finally will identify the effective mechanism to address support for subscribership and facilities deployment in Indian communities in near reservation areas. I look forward to working with my colleagues and with tribal governments and communities to make this happen.