



NEWS RELEASE
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State Commissioners Press FCC on Rural Telephone Call Completion

North Dakota Public Service Commissioners Brian Kalk, Randy Christmann and Julie Fedorchak have called on the Federal Communications Commission to take immediate action against telecommunications providers who may be hampering telephone service in rural areas.

Phone customers, particularly in rural areas in North Dakota and throughout the nation, are experiencing growing numbers of lost or dropped calls, a problem that has been confirmed by the North Dakota Association of Telephone Cooperatives. The problem results when a company carrying a long distance call intentionally chooses to drop the call rather than pay the access fees or charges necessary to complete it.

Commission Chairman Brian Kalk said, "As the telecommunications industry continues to see more service providers we must ensure all companies play by the same rules and don't 'cherry pick' certain service areas."

Commissioners said the FCC has known about the problem for two years, and released a declaratory order in February 2012 stating any telecommunications service providers that blocked, choked, or restricted telecommunications traffic in any way would be subject to penalties for non-compliance. Despite this ruling, the agency has not yet penalized any providers, even though the problems in rural areas continue.

"The FCC has the necessary rule in place, now they need to get serious about enforcing it," North Dakota Commissioner Julie Fedorchak said. "This is an issue of both public convenience and safety. People are paying for reliable phone service and have a very reasonable expectation of being able to receive all the calls placed to them. The FCC's inaction is unacceptable."

"Problems with some of the national and international carriers are growing, and it is consumers in rural states that are being punished. I'm pleased that the NDPSC is united in urging the FCC to do its job by enforcing their own rules" according to Commissioner Randy Christmann.

In the letter to FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski, National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) and 112 State commissioners said the agency, which has acknowledged public safety problems, has not addressed the issue through any punitive orders. "Over two years have passed since the Commission was alerted to the dramatic increases in call completion problems," NARUC members wrote. "Although [the agency's] declaratory ruling stated that violators could face cease and desist orders, forfeiture, license revocations and fines of up to \$1.5 million, no orders, forfeitures or fines have been issued."

As the FCC noted in its ruling, rural phone companies have reported an increase in consumer complaints that they are not receiving many long-distance calls and faxes. In fact, the FCC reported that nearly 80 percent of rural phone companies have experienced similar problems. This means rural consumers could be missing urgent phone calls from families and friends, small businesses could lose customers, and much more.