
Communications issues still need Congress's attention

Contributed by Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska)
February 06, 2007

As our nation moves farther into the digital age, there are several important issues that Congress should consider which will dramatically affect the way millions of Americans communicate. These issues include reforming universal service, easing the transition to digital television, and encouraging Internet access.

All Americans deserve the advantages presented by essential communications, and telemedicine and distance learning are especially important to rural America. To encourage the deployment of such services, we must maintain and reform the universal service program, which helps connect the entire nation. An important and overdue first step is the USA Act (S.101 the Universal Service for Americans Act), which mirrors language contained in the comprehensive communications bill reported out of the Senate Commerce Committee last year.

The USA Act would place all communications companies on a level playing field, acknowledging new technologies and lowering the burden on industry. The bill ensures continued support for schools and libraries to provide broadband Internet access to students, library patrons and health clinics (including rural pharmacies). Additionally, it creates a program to support the expansion of broadband Internet access in underserved areas. More will need to be done, but these measures are desperately needed to ensure access to communications for all Americans so our nation does not lose its technological edge.

Basic communications services for Americans are not the only issues that need to be addressed. A sea change is coming in the way Americans watch television, especially for those who receive broadcast signals over the air. Last year, the Senate set a hard date for the transition from analog television broadcasting to digital television broadcasting. This transition will allow broadcast spectrum to be devoted to emergency interoperable communications for police, firemen, paramedics and other first responders.

Also, pursuant to the digital transition law, valuable broadcast spectrum will be auctioned and proceeds will fund a converter box program to ease the digital transition for consumers. Auction proceeds will also fund important grants for public safety and first responders. To help with the transition, the National Association of Broadcasters is launching a massive education campaign to ensure consumers are aware of the coming change and are prepared for the switch to digital signals.

The Internet is an increasingly vital part of our daily lives, and Congress must work to ensure that we do not hinder its growth. It is imperative that the government find ways to encourage the deployment of broadband throughout the nation and promote increased Internet access for all Americans. The digital television transition, which passed last Congress, will free up valuable spectrum for increased broadband Internet deployment.

The FCC has also played an important part in this goal by recently approving an item that will speed the deployment of advanced networks by telephone companies. Such networks will provide competition for cable companies, and reduce prices. These networks will also increase quality television programming and offer Americans even faster Internet access. Congress can also play a role in supporting improved Internet access by extending the Internet Tax Freedom Act, which will expire on Nov. 1, 2007.

As Congress addresses these pressing communications issues, it should not get sidetracked by theoretical problems. Some members of Congress would impose net regulation in an era of unprecedented investment, innovation and job creation. I continue to support the right of every broadband consumer to access all legal content on the Internet. But behind flashy catchphrases, special interests are pushing agendas that will not solve the communications issues that require immediate attention. In fact, both Robert Kahn and David Farber, known as the father and grandfather of the Internet, are firmly opposed to sweeping regulation of the Internet.

The Internet has not only existed, but flourished without unnecessary government intervention. It is my hope that special interests do not succeed in denying consumers the benefits of communications technology, investment, innovation and jobs.
