### BEFORE THE NEW MEXICO PUBLIC REGULATION COMMISSION

IN THE MATTER OF POTENTIAL AMENDMENTS TO STATE RURAL UNIVERSAL SERVICE FUND RULE 17.11.10 NMAC

Docket No. 19-00286-UT

#### **COMMENTS OF CTIA**

CTIA<sup>1</sup> submits these Comments on proposed amendments to 17.11.10 NMAC (State Rural Universal Service Fund) (the "Proposed Rules") pursuant to the Order Issuing Notice of Proposed Rulemaking entered in the above-captioned docket on June 3, 2020 (the "Order") by the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission (the "Commission").

CTIA appreciates the Commission's interest in perfecting its State Rural Universal Service Fund ("SRUSF") rules, including the explicit addition of wireless into the Commission's definition of broadband internet access service. The current size of the SRUSF is sufficient to support broadband projects that will help New Mexico realize its broadband deployment objectives if expenditures are made prudently. Accordingly, as the Commission continues to refine the SRUSF processes, it should keep the following core principles in mind. First, SRUSF rules should promote efficiency by granting high-cost funding only where it is truly needed, and limiting the overall burden on ratepayers. Additionally, SRUSF rules should promote a competitively and technologically neutral process. Finally, SRUSF rules should promote transparency and accountability to help ensure taxpayers' money is being spent wisely.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> CTIA – The Wireless Association ("CTIA") (www.ctia.org) represents the U.S. wireless communications industry and the companies throughout the mobile ecosystem that enable Americans to lead a 21<sup>st</sup> century connected life. The association's members include wireless carriers, device manufacturers, and suppliers as well as app and content companies. CTIA vigorously advocates at all levels of government for policies that foster continued wireless innovation and investment. The association also coordinates the industry's voluntary best practices, hosts educational events that promote the wireless industry and co-produces the industry's leading wireless tradeshow. CTIA was founded in 1984 and is based in Washington, D.C.

Below, CTIA offers a number of concrete suggestions to bring the Proposed Rule in line with these principles. In particular, the Commission should reject the proposal to allow access replacement subsidies for "consumer broadband-only loops," which would violate a number of statutory provisions. Moreover, the Commission should remove incorporating a fixed residential benchmark rate in its rule, and open a separate proceeding to address the residential benchmark rate or address changes to the residential benchmark rate during its annual determination of the access line charge to ratepayers.

# I. THE COMMISSION'S SRUSF RULE REVISIONS SHOULD BE GUIDED BY CORE PRINCIPLES THAT ENSURE ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR BROADBAND UNDER THE CAP

As noted, the SRUSF is currently capped by the Legislature at a maximum size of \$30 million.<sup>2</sup> The Legislature requires the Commission to allocate at least \$5 million of the SRUSF for broadband and requires companies to spend at least 60 percent of their access-replacement subsidies on broadband.<sup>3</sup> After the Commission allocates \$5 million for broadband and allocates funding for Lifeline, access replacement, and other fund requirements, the Commission has discretion to allocate any remaining funds to broadband projects.<sup>4</sup>

Data shows that overall landline telephone connections continue to decrease while broadband adoption has been steadily increasing.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that changes to the SRUSF should be tailored to ensure that access replacement subsidies limit the broadband funding available from the SRUSF to the least extent possible. The best way to accomplish this is by ensuring that the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See NMAC 17.11.10.19(C).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See NMAC 17.11.10.27(A).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See NMAC 17.11.10.31(B).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See, e.g., FCC 2020 Broadband Deployment Report (April 20, 2020), available at https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-20-50A1.pdf (last accessed August 3, 2020).

Commission's SRUSF reforms, including the Proposed Rule, adhere to a set of core principles that promote efficiency and accountability within the SRUSF.

# II. THE COMMISSION SHOULD ONLY PROVIDE ACCESS REPLACEMENT SUBSIDIES WHERE THEY ARE TRULY NEEDED AND MAKE THE MOST EFFICIENT USE OF AVAILABLE FUNDING

One guiding principle of SRUSF reforms is that the Commission should strictly limit access replacement subsidies to where they are mandated by statute, and ensure that all SRUSF funds are spent as efficiently as possible in order to ensure that limited SRUSF funding under the cap is used to achieve the greatest possible broadband deployment. As mentioned *supra*, any SRUSF money not spent on legacy access subsidies or other fund requirements, like Lifeline, is money that can be used for forward-looking broadband projects, making efficiency a key to advance the Commission's broadband deployment goals.

A specific revision the Commission can make to support this principle is rejecting the amendment to Rule 17.11.10.9(A)(1) that would set the residential benchmark rate at \$18 by rule. There are a number of flaws with this proposal. First, no justification has been given for this change, which would increase access replacement subsidy funding required to offset decreasing the benchmark, and thus mean less potential funding for broadband projects. In fact, FCC data suggests that the benchmark rate should be even higher. The Commission should address the benchmark rate in a separate proceeding instead of setting it arbitrarily now; indeed, the Commission acknowledged the significant controversy with the benchmark rate when it set the per-connection surcharge rate for the SRUSF for 2020, suggesting the issue needs a more fulsome

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See FCC 2020 Urban Rate Survey Results (Dec. 5, 2019), available at <a href="https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-19-1237A1\_Rcd.pdf">https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-19-1237A1\_Rcd.pdf</a> (last accessed August 3, 2020) (showing a national urban average voice rate for 2020 of \$34.81).

record.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the Proposed Rule would lock the \$18 benchmark rate in with only a "time to time as necessary" review schedule for the Commission, when in reality the benchmark rate should fluctuate based on the market. Setting the benchmark now as a fixed amount within the rule without examining its appropriate level is inappropriate, and failing to require review of the benchmark at regular intervals disincentivizes ensuring an efficient benchmark level to limit access replacement subsidies. Any benchmark rate set in the Commission's rules should also mandate annual proceedings to analyze applicable data on the benchmark and permit stakeholders impacted by the rate to weigh in.

The Commission should also reject the inclusion of "consumer broadband-only loops" in the Proposed Rule as eligible for access replacement support from the SRUSF.<sup>8</sup> The New Mexico statute plainly requires that the SRUSF "shall be competitively and technologically neutral, equitable and nondiscriminatory in its collection and distribution of funds, portable between eligible telecommunications carriers." Beyond the clear illogic of making lines that would never have generated access charges eligible for access charge replacement, making consumer broadband-only loops eligible for access replacement support would violate this statute in multiple ways.

First, these broadband-only services are not assessable for SRUSF purposes, <sup>10</sup> meaning that companies would receive money for these loops without contributing for them, creating competitive discrimination. And in the event ETCs receiving access replacement subsidies were to recover any lost access lines, they could be *profiting* from the SRUSF funding, a clearly anti-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See Order Setting State Rural Universal Service Fund Size and Per-Communication Connection Charge for 2020; Order Granting Petition of NMECG, Case No. 19-00210-UT (October 2, 2019).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See Proposed Rule at Sections 17.11.10.7 (A), (K) (I) and 17.11.10.9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> NM Stat. §63-9H-6(C).

<sup>10</sup> See NM Stat. §63-9H-6(B).

competitive scenario (and a further violation of the Rural Telecommunications Act ("RTA"), which requires "revenue-neutral" rate rebalancing for carriers.)<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, this proposal seeks to prevent former access replacement subsidies from dwindling, violating the statutory requirement for portability by keeping funding levels locked in for some ETCs and preventing distribution to others.

Additionally, this proposal would read the New Mexico statute overbroadly. The RTA uses the term of art "access line" for replacement funding – not access line-equivalent. <sup>12</sup> Even if the Commission were to read "access line" as such, broadband-only loops clearly aren't equivalent; not only do they not generate access charges, but they are not subject to the other types of regulation that the Commission imposes on access lines, including rate regulation. These differences push consumer broadband-only loops so far away from the definition of "access line" that such a Commission interpretation would be impermissibly overbroad. <sup>13</sup>

Finally, making broadband loops eligible for access replacement funding would exacerbate the issues previously discussed with setting the residential benchmark at \$18 by rule. A benchmark of \$18 for broadband service is artificially, and extremely, low. The cost of broadband services can easily exceed \$40-50 per month for even the lowest tiers of service. <sup>14</sup> For all these reasons, the Commission should reject this proposal.

The Commission should also, to the extent allowable, consider existing funding when judging grants for the broadband program. Proposed Rule 17.11.10.31(A) disallows projects with

<sup>11</sup> NM Stat. §63-9H-6(K).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See NM Stat. §§63-9H-6(B), (K)(1).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> See State ex rel. Sandel v. N.M. Pub. Util. Comm'n, 1999-NMSC-019, 127 N.M. 272 at para. 7 (stating that while the Commission's administration of a statute is afforded some deference, the Commission does not have "the authority to pour any meaning it desires into the statute.")

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See, e.g. Whistleout, Internet Plans in New Mexico, available at <a href="https://www.whistleout.com/Internet/Search?tab=fixed&address=NM">https://www.whistleout.com/Internet/Search?tab=fixed&address=NM</a> (last accessed August 3, 2020) (showing that the least expensive landline broadband plan in New Mexico over the Commission's proposed 25 mbps download threshold for "underserved areas" costs \$40/month).

"full-third party funding" from receiving SRUSF broadband funds, but the list of exceptions in the Proposed Rule that will not be considered "third-party" is so broad (including loans, federal USF support, or "other sources not directly tied to the proposed project")<sup>15</sup> so as to render that restriction meaningless. In particular, grant applicants should have to show that their SRUSF funding is necessary for the provision of broadband and not already addressed by other funding.

## III. THE COMMISSION SHOULD ENSURE THE SRUSF PROCESS IS COMPETITIVELY AND TECHNOLOGICALLY NEUTRAL

Another key principle to help ensure efficient use of limited SRUSF funds is to remove technological hurdles or competitive disadvantages that can serve as barriers to the most effective service in an unserved or underserved area.

Proposed Rules 17.11.10.7 (C) and (D) would raise the speed thresholds for underserved areas (from 10/1 mbps to 25/3 mbps download/upload) and unserved areas (from 4mbps download to 10 mbps download). Increasing the speed thresholds, especially for unserved areas, could limit interested service providers from reaching those areas. It potentially encourages broadband project recipients to invest in upgrades to more populated areas that already have some level of broadband service to the detriment of customers in areas that are truly unserved or underserved. The Commission should weigh whether the increase in minimum speed for SRUSF projects is worth any potential inefficiencies or inequities such limits could cause. Further, the Commission should also consider whether these speed threshold increases are advisable, considering the continued existence of unserved areas in New Mexico.

The Commission should also not delete Rule 17.11.10.6's clause that SRUSF funding "includ[es] commercial radio services carriers as determined by the commission." Clarifying that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Proposed Rule at Section 17.11.10.31(A).

wireless carriers may participate in the program will only help ensure that SRUSF goals are met in a competitively and technologically neutral fashion that will benefit all New Mexicans.

### IV. THE COMMISSION SHOULD ENSURE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE SRUSF PROCESS

Finally, the Commission should ensure that the SRUSF application process is as open and transparent as possible, with accountability measures for funding awards and docketed applications on which interested parties are able to comment.

In particular, the Commission should remove Proposed Rule 17.11.10.31 (I)'s "off-season" application program for broadband grants. This provision, which would authorize reimbursement of costs on broadband deployment projects on a retroactive basis, could potentially sidestep the more fulsome review process for broadband applications established by the Proposed Rule. Furthermore, ETCs that made the types of investments described in Proposed Rule 17.11.10.31 (I) made a business decision to do so with full knowledge that SRUSF funding was not then available for the specific projects. Retroactive reimbursement of completed projects will simply reduce the available funding for prospective expansion projects, and contravenes the purpose of the grant program, which is to incentivize new projects in unserved areas that need the funding, not rebate projects that were going to be built regardless. Whether or not the Commission rejects Proposed Rule 17.11.10.31 (I), at a minimum the Commission should make it clear that any SRUSF grants that directly fund capital projects should be treated as grants in aid of construction. As such, only capital costs in excess of funded amounts should be includable in an ETC's rate base to the extent any prospective funding is established on a cost-based, need-based basis.

CTIA is also concerned that the Proposed Rule would eliminate a number of accountability rules for support recipients (such as the revenue reports in 17.11.10.16 and administrative cost

reports in 17.11.10.7(A)). While it is possible that these reports are obsolete from a regulatory perspective, the Commission should ensure they have been adequately replaced to ensure continuing SRUSF oversight is not hindered.

### V. CONCLUSION

For all the foregoing reasons, CTIA respectfully requests that the Commission amend the Proposed Rules as set forth above.

Dated: August 3, 2020

Respectfully Submitted,

JALBRIGHT LAW, LLC

By: /s/ Jeffrey H. Albright
Jeffrey H. Albright
JAlbright Law, LLC
201 Third St NW Suite 1880
Albuquerque NM 87102
(505) 926-4105
JA@Jalblaw.com
Attorney for CTIA

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Docket No. 19-00286-UT

I HEREBY CERTIFFY that a true and correct copy of CTIA Comments, was sent via e-

mail for filing to prc.records@state. nm.us, along to the following parties on August 3, 2020:

Marco E. Gonzales Mitchell F. Brecher

Debra McGuire- Mercer

John Badal

Patricia Salazar Ives

David Lafuria

Timothy Shaffery

Jeffrey Albright

Britney Lloyd

Rohan Ranaraja

Amanda Edwards

Michael Tamburino

Jean Snopkowski

Alan P. Morel

Anthony Smith

Cecile Archibeque

Dale Laman

Lourdes Vifias

Marcy Guillen

Mark Costlow

Mary Beth Cicala

Matthew Hoover Michael Levba

Lynn E. Mostoller

Sharma Purcell

Donna Danielle

Linda Dallaero

Mary Hope

Carol Valdez

Herve Andrieu

Jerry Nussbaum

William Cabral

Darneshia Smith

Marsha Pokorny

Annabelle Pacheco

Danny Gray

Teri Ohta Gene DeJordy

George Clark

Godfrey Enjady

Jace Colbert

Jack Pestaner

Jane Yee

MEG@ modrall.com;

brecherm@gtlaw.com;

rmercerdm@gtlaw.com:

jbadal@sacredwindnm.com;

pives@cuddymccarthy.com:

DLaFuria@fcclaw.com;

tshaffery@cellularoneaz.com:

JA@JalbLaw.com;

Blloyd@atni.com;

Rranaraja@atni.com;

Al: a JalbI aw.com:

mtamburino@solixinc.com;

jsnopko@solixinc.com;

apmpa@valornet.com;

anthony@zianet.com;

cecile@yuccatelecom.com;

dalel@pvt.com;

lvinas@twncorp.com;

rnguillen@ dellcity.com:

help@swcp.com;

mbc@tbtc.net;

mhoover@kitcarson.net:

mileyba@lajicarita.com;

lem@sutinfirm.com:

sharma.purcell@vtc.net;

Dgl6l2@att.com;

Ldellaero@matrixbt.com:

regulatory@matrixbt.com;

cvaldez@montand.com:

taxes@telna.com;

preferred@aol.com;

bcs@los-alamos.net;

dsmith@acnine.com:

rn.pokomy@ildmail.com;

apacheco@lajicarita.com;

dgray@lajicarita.com; Teri.Ohta'a t-mobile.com;

gene@dakelvn.com:

george.clarke@state.nm.us;

genjady@matinetworks.net;

accounts@cybermesa.com;

accounts a cybermesa.com:

yee a CABQ gov:

Jeremy Smuckler Jessica Matushek John Clark Jon Brinton Jules Coffinan Kelley Wells Kevin Bartley Nick Kyriakides RalphDichy Jerome Block Luther Eakins Leon Nall Scott Klopack Sharon Thomas Jane Hill Zianet

Jessica Renneker Dan Wheeler Alan Herman David Robinson Steve Gatto Courtney Spears Gil Arviso Kelly Faul Amy Gross R. Gavidia Tom Olson Art Hull Sharon Mullin Shawn Hanson Sherry Boyd Scott Klopack Brian Gilbert Stanley Smith Steven Chernoff Tim Keefer Alicia Armijo KLehrman JR Carter Sharon Saenz

Adriana Badal
Tim Shaffery
Kim Legant
Susan Bitter Smith
Accessline Comms. Corp
Access One, Inc.
Access Point, Inc.

Alan P. Morel

Adriana Badal

ACN Corns. Services. Inc. Affinity Network, Inc. Airnex Communications. Inc. Airespring, Inc.

Alltell Corns., LLC
American Telecom Systems
AmeriVision Comms. Inc.
Verizon Long Distance
Broadwing Corns., LLC.
Buehner-Fry, Inc.

Bullseye Telecom., Inc. Business Ntwk Long Distance Business Telecom., LLC Cincinnati Bell Any Distance Communications Network Billing

Comtech 21, LLC

jsmickle@acninc.com; jessica.matushek@ftr.com; jclark@GMSSR.com; jon\_brinton@mitel.com; jcoffinan@pngmail.com; kelley.wells@ptci.net; kbattley@pvt.com; nick@nettalk.com; rdichy@mettel.net; jeromedblock@msn.com; luther@vucca.net; leonn@vuccatelecom.com;

sklopack@matrixbt.com; sthomas@tmine.com: jhill@cybermesa.com; anthony@zianet.com; jrenneker@nos.com; danw@ntscom.com: alanh@plateautel.com: davidr@plateautel.com; sgatto@gvnw.com: espears@gvnw.com; gil\_arviso@yahoo.com, kelly.faul@xo.com: agross@tmine.com; rgavidia@wes.com: tolson@montand.com: arthulll a gmail com: sm3162@att.com; shawn.hanson@ptci.net; sboyda joneswalker.com; sklopack@matrixbt.com; bgilbert@cellularoneaz.com: ssmith a loneswalker.com: schemoff@feelaw.com;

admin @ vcimail com;
aarmijo @ mnag.gov;
klehman @ entouchwireless.com;
Ircarter @ readvwireless.com;
saen / @ matinetworks.net;
apnipa @ apmipa.com;
adriana @ amruralbroadband.org;
tshaffery @ cellularoneaz.com;
kim. legant @ gmail.com;
susan @ swcable.org;
Kirsten. Felgate @ avalara.com;
alee @ accessoneine.com;

mark@csilongwood.com:
tking@tminc.com;
jrenneker@nos.com:
arnold@airnex.net;
catt@airespring.com;
steve delgado@verizon.com;
myra@ats-firstcall.com;
maskew@affinity4.com;
verizonlongdistance@vz-ld.com;
Cathryn.smith@level3.com;
mark@csilongwood.com;
jhomkohl@bullseyetelecom.com.
atreder@bossys.com;

tracev.l.giles/ā windstream.com;

 $cbad.regulatory compliance \underline{\widehat{a}} \ cinbell.com.$ 

atreder@bossys.com; L.Esposito@Profitecinc.com; Convergia, Inc.

Custom Teleconnect, Inc.

Delcom. Inc.

Easton Telecom., LLC Electric Lightwave, LLC

Encompass Comm., LLC Enhanced Comms. Grp. LLC Enhanced Comm. Newtork, Inc. Securus Technologies, Inc.

France Telecomm. Corporate Solutions LLC

Operator Service Co., LLC OPEX Communications. Inc. Paetec Comms../USLEC

PNG Telecom., Inc.

PTUS, Inc.

Public Com. Services. Inc. Quantumshift Comms.,Inc. CenturyLink Comms., LLC Reduced Rate Long Distance Reliant Comms., Inc.

800 Response Information Services LLC

Sierra Communications, Inc. SBC Long Distance, LLC Sprint Corns. Co. LP CenturyLink Public Comms. Telecom Management, Inc. Telmex USA, LLC Telrite Corporation Touchtone Comms., Inc. TTI National, Inc. Tularosa Corns., Inc. inContact, dba UCN, Inc. U.S. South Comms., Inc.

USA Digital Comms., Inc. Value-Added Comms. Inc. Verizon Select Services, Inc. Voicecom Telecom., LLC WDT World Discount Telecom.

Westel, Inc.

Wholesale Carrier Services

Leaco Rural Telephone Coop(Wireless)

Navajo Comms. Co., Inc.

Roosevelt County Rural Telephone Coop.

Valley Telephone Cooperative Western New Mexico Tel.Co. Valor Telecom, of Texas, LP

Spok. Inc.

Frontier Comms. Of America

DeltaCom, LLC BCN Telecom Inc Dailas MTA LP

Broadband Dynamics, LLC Plateau Telecom- NM RSA2 Plateau Telecom., Inc. Plateau Telecom., RSA 4 Plateau Telecom. Long Distance Yucca Telecom. Systems (CLEC) Cyber Mesa Computer Systems Inc

Valu Tel Corns., Inc. Preferred Long Distance Windstream Corns. TW Telecom of New Mexico

Conectado, Inc.

Nationwide Long Distance Svice

FutureSalesTax@future.ca: bperna@customteleconnect.com;

ruben a dellcity.com; bstewart@eastontelecom.com;

sydney.olderbak@integratelecom.com:

Lluna a ecllc.com; mark@csilongwood.com; Kenneth.Leong@ey.com;

cmoore2@securustechnologies.com: shirley.thomas@orange.com; jriley@telecompliance.net; regulatory@opexid.com:

tracey l.giles@windstream.com: nmallev@eztax.com.

elena.thomasson@birch.com;

bhackett@gil.net;

ibrown a veomsolutions.com; donnie.aultman@centurylink.com: regdbg@dominionbusinessgroup.com: regdbg a dominionbusinessgroup.com: sperrotte@800response.com;

kimbyt a bacavalley.com; TM5886@att.com: al.b.clark@sprint.com;

donnie.aultman@centurylink.com; mark@esilongwood.com: usaregulatory@telmex com. michael.geoffroy@telrite.com: manzalone a touchtone.net; eugene.c.wu@verizon.com;

jbeug a tbtc.net:

kimm.partridge@incontact com: rmadley@incomm.com: ceckroat@usad.com; bhackett@gtl.net;

robert mutzenback@verizon.com; I isa.Affolter@Intelliverse.com:

beth@gsaudits.com: thelma.harkrider@westel.net: mark@csilongwood.com: dsnider a leaco org. jessica.matushek@ftr.com. luther@yucca.net; sharmapurcell@vtc.net; bstroman@wnmt.com; tracey.l giles@windstream.com. matt.ford a spok.com;

jessica.matushek@ftr.com: mark@csilongwood.com: tracey Lgiles @ windstream.com: steve.delgado@verizon.com: grodham  $\tilde{a}$  broadbanddynamics.com: alanh/a plateautel.com;

alanh@plateautel.com: alanh@plateautel.com: alanh a plateautel.com: luther a yucca.net: lana a cybermesa.com: tim@vcimail.com; preferred a aol.com;

tracey.l.giles@windstream.com: Tim.Goodwin@CenturyLink.com;

atreder @bossys.com:

Linda.parks@americanmessaging.net;

American Messaging Services Virgin Mobile USA, LLC CCI Network Services, LLC

TerraCom, Inc.

Bandwidth.com CLEC, LLC

TerraCom, Inc. Zayo Group, LLC Transtelco, Inc.

Pay Tel Communications Inc. Network Services Solutions MJ2IP, LLC/City Hosted Solutions

Commnet Wireless, LLC

Ting, Inc.

Ready Wireless, LLC Tanager Telecoms. NM LLC

UVNV,Inc.

MetroPCS Texas LLC Cricket Wireless, LLC TWC Digital Phone LLC Digium Cloud Services, LLC Conterra Ultra Broadband Jive Communications, Inc. NetFortis Acquistion Co., Inc. S-Net Communications, Inc.

Pulsar360, Inc.

Thinking Phone Networks, Inc. Valley Connections LLC IDS Metrocom LLC Metro Optical Solutions, Inc. Stream Corns., LLC

Magna5 fka X5 OPCO LLC MegaPath Cloud Co., LLC Peerless Network, Inc.

Integrated Services, Inc

West Safety Corns., Inc. (Intrado) Windstream Southwest Long Distance, LP

Airus, Inc. Nextiva. Inc. DSI-ITI, LLC TracFone Wireless, Inc. WiMacTel, Inc.

V onage America, Inc.

Netwolves Network Services LLC TeleQuality Corns., Inc. Crexendo Business Solutions

Flat Wireless, LLC

Greenfly Networks Inc dba Clearfly Com uni cations MFG Services, Inc. Residential Long Distance, Inc West IP Communications

Phone.com, Inc.

Cintex Wireless Talton Communications, Inc.

Ionex Comms. North, Inc. COMM-CORE, LLC WaveNation, LLC Select Communications, LLC Bandwidth.com. Inc.

Google North America Inc. dba Project Fi by Google

Talk America Services, LLC The People's Operator USA Patriot Mobile, LLC M5 Networks, LLC Vodafone US Inc. Denta!Tek, LLC SagenetLLC

ALB.Clark@sprint.com; taxes@ccicom.com: jriley@telecompliance.net; ljfreeman@bandwidth com; jriley@telecompliance.net; trenton.labore@zayo.com: ifp@transtelco.net: tsmith@paytel.com:

jennysmith@networkservices.org: johnc@citycommunications.com:

Rranara'a @ ami.com; emeyering@nicows.com; skokotan@readywireless.com; brian adams@tanageriel.com: ggrinham ā ultra.me: probertson a metropes.com: ng4692@att.com:

robert.hightower a thomson.com;

bduffey@digium.com: sturley@conterra.com; msharp a get ive.com: cneeld@tminc.com; mark@csilongwood.com: jswanson:ā pulsar360.com: george a thinkingphones.com: sharma.purcell@vtc.net; michael,ebaugh@tdstelecom.com; jasonh@metrooptical.com;

renee.hombaker@streamenergy.net; regulatory@magna5global.com; Harout.yenikomshian@megapatch.com:

jbarnicle@peerlessnetwork.com;

atreder@bossys.com: regulatory@intrado.com: tracey.l.giles@windstream.com.

joost@peerless.com; mark@scilongwood.com: bhackett@gtl.net: CDillon@TracFone.com: jmackenzie@viiz.com; brendan kasper@vonage.com: christopher.denny@netwolves.com:

jeff a telequality com: scockerham@fastekteam.com; djiron@flatwireless.com: tim dodge@clearfly.net; jmlowell@zianet.com: atreder@bossys.com: lboone@smoothstone.com: taxes@phone.com; mlubin a tmine.com:

robin@talton.com: Stephen Spohrer@birch.com: mark@csilongwood.com: beth@gsaudits.com:

jerry@selectconferencing.com; Infreeman@bandwidth.com: andyliao@google.com; cfiola@tminc.com: matt@tpo.com: glenn@eoscell.com: salestax@shoretel.com;

bryan.ganno@yodafoneone.com; mstrubel  $\widehat{a}$  dentalsolutionsile, com; Andrew.RuizdeGamboa@SageNet.com: Comcast OTRI, LLC

Netcom US

Cable One Netcom Systems Group, LLC

Encartele, Inc. Onvoy, LLC

Covoda Comms., Inc.
OneStream Networks, LLC
ISC. Inc.Nenture Tech.

Zippy Tech Inc./Cedar Netwks

Tello, LLC XCastLabs

iTalk Global Comms., Inc.

ROK Mobile, Inc. Cheryl C. Powers Gary Rodham Patrick D. Crocker Michael Bagley

Dave Conn
Curtis Hopfinger
Maria Graham
David Bailey

Lance Steinhart Peggy Briesh Leo Baca

Leo Baca Danielle Frappier Lisa Tatkir Susan Cockerham John Jennings Kate Dutton Keith Nussbaum Jenna Brown

Jennifer Keen Lakisha Taylor Karen Kilgore Cholla Khoury

Gideon Elliot Robert Lundin Elaine Heltman N. Burslem R. Hanna

Michelle Austin Kasey C. Chow Gayle Gouker Warren Fischer Scott Lundquist Russell Sarazen Kenneth Schifman Brian Gilbert Kyle J. Smith

Tim Goodwin Edwin Reese Bill Templeman David Ziegler Judith A. Riley Catherine Hannan Eddie Mishan Joan M. Engler D. Jannes G. Cookman

Raymond Cowley Sonya Blackwell Brian Gilbert Catherine Nicolaou

George Thomson

M. Gruenhut

Gregory\_Josuweit@comcast.com;

tyler@netcom-us.com:

vickie.bailey@cableone.biz; don.peeler@encartele.net: Mary.Buley@inteliquent.com;

mark.suto@tolydigital.net; ahart@onestreanmetworks.com; I conard.Lane@ventech.com; jedwards@cedarnetworks.com; jsm@commlawgroup.com; esears@xcastlabs.com;

bburge@italkglobal.com;

agucich@nationwideregulatorycompliacnce.com;

verizonlongdistance@verizon.com; grodham@diversifiedconsulting.net;

contact@nationwideregulatorycompliance.com; michael.bagleyl@verizonwireless.com; regulatorycomplaints@broadviewnet.com; chopfinger@securustechnologies.com; ConsumerComplaints@cable.comcast.com;

dbailey@bullseyetelecom.com:
lsteinhart@telecorn.comsel.com;
peggybytonly@bacavalley.com;
Leo.baca@centurylink.com;
DanielleFrappier@dwt.com;
Daye.com@t-mobile.com;
scockerhan@fastekteam.com;
jjeunings@bigrivertelephone.com;
regulatoryaffairs@accesspointinc.com;
keith@preferredlongdistance.com;
jbrown@ycomsolutions.com;

contact@nationwideregulatorycompliance.com:

support@cedarnetworks.com: kkilgore@cuddymccarthy.com;

ckhoury@nmag.gov; gelliot a nmag gov; rlundin@nmag.gov; Eheltman/gnmag.gov; ninaburslem@imagitel.com: hannalaw@windstream net. maustin@cellularoneaz.com; kchow@telecomcounsel.com: ggouker@cellularoneaz.com: wfischer@qsiconsulting.com; Slundquist@qsiconsulting.com; russell.sarazen@t-mobile.com. Kenneth Schifman  $\bar{a}$  sprint com: brian a youngturks consulting.com: Kyle.J.Smithl24.civ@mail.mil; tim.goodwin@centurylink.com: edwin.reese@verizonbusiness.com: wtempleman@cmtisantafe.com;

wtenpleman@cmtisantafe.com:
david.l.ziegler@Centurylink.com:
jriley@telecompliance.net;
mail@CommLawGroup.com;
eddie.mishan@emsenusa.com;
joan.m.engler@verizon.com;
djames4485@cybermesa.com;
gcookman@granitenet.com;
mgruenhut@us-south.net;
george.thomson@ftt.com;
rcowley@ingts.com;
corporate@teledias.com,
bgilbert@cellularoneaz.com;
cnicolaou@sacredwindnm.com.

Sharon Porter Richard Monto Troy Judd Victoria Williams William P. Hunt Janice Badal Donna Daniele Kitty J. Craemer Virgil Barnard John Francis Jennifer Dwan Jean Parker Matthew Ford Leo Garza Launa Waller

James Boyd Evans Janice Ono Juan Saenz Mark Lammert Charles Ferrell Wayne Gibson Maria Sanchez Allison Bloom Dale Spider Christopher Collins Javier Rodriguez

Steven D. Metts Ioan Ellis-PRC Eugene Evans-PRC Russell Fisk-PRC Mark Cessarich-PRC Mike Ripperger-PRC Hank Adair

Richard Matzke Brad Ellsworth Ed Serna Michael Ruziska Kyle J. Smith

Global Connection Inc. of America

Global Tel\*Link Corp.

Total Holdings, Inc GTC Comm. iLOKA, Inc./New Cloud Ntwrks Inmate Calling Solutions, LLC Intellicall Operator Services, Inc. Western Interactive Networks International Telcom. Ltd. Mite! NetSolutions, Inc. West Telecom Services, LLC

LCR Telecom. LLC

Legacy Long Distance Intl' Inc. Level 3 Communications, LLC

Mescalero Apache Telecom. Long Distance

Matrix Telecom, LLC McGraw Communications, Inc. McLeod USA Telecomm, Svcs. Metropolitan Telecoms, of NM National Access Long Distance National Directory Assistance Network Billing Systems, LLC Network Comms. Int'! Corp. Network Service Billing, Inc. NetworkIP, LLC EarthLink Business, LLC

NobelTel, LLC

NOS Communications, Inc.

sporter@powemetco.com: rmonto@neutraltandem.com:

trov.judd@vtc.net:

 $vwilliams \underline{@} iwireless home.com:$ williamp.hunt@dish.com; jcbadal@sacredwindnm.com;

dgl6l2@att.com;

kitty.craemer@tanagertel.com; virgil.bamard@vtc.net; jfrancis@wnmt.com; idwan@cedametworks.com: jparker@credomobile.com; matt.ford@spok.com; nmaarp@aarp.org: LaunaW@plateautel.com; jboyde a vuccatelecom.com:

janice.ono@att.com: info@losalamosnetwork.com;

mark@csilongwood.com; Charlieferrell90@gmail.com; wgibson@ami.com;

Mariar.sanchez@state.nm.us:

abloom@ldxx.com; dsnider@leaco.org;

Christopher.collins/a state.nm.us;

jrl5l5@att.com; steven.metts@vtc.net: Joan.ellis@state.nm.us; Eugene, Evans a state.nm.us; Russell.fisk@state.nm.us; Mark Cessarich a state.nm.us; Mike ripperger@state.nm us:

hadair@fintn.org; rmatzke @gallup.com; bellsworth@bloomfieldnm.com; ed.sema@charter.com:

regulatory@entelegent.com: kyle.smithl24.civ@mail.mil; abriggs@gcioa.com: bhackett@gtl.net;

legal@mvgtc.com. sdonner@microtech-tel.com; kdawson@icsolutions.com; m.pokomy@ildmail.com: jfrancis/a gilanet.com: mark@csilongwood.com;

paul.ciaramitaro@mitel.com; jdietzel@rbm.com: atredera bossys.com: rquinto@legacyinmate.com; Cathryn.smith@leve13.com: mporeilly@matinetworks.net; ldellaero â matrixbt.com: smendez@mcgrawcom.net;

rdichy a mettel net; atreder a bossys.com:

barbarahoard@nationalda.com: KBelhumer@fusionconnect.com: Stephanie.Jackson@ncic.com: atreder@bossys.com: regulatory a networkip.net: tracev.l.giles@windstream.com: colleen guffey@nobelbiz.com:

tracey.l.giles@windstream.com;

jrenneker@nos.com:

NOSY A Limited Partnership NTS Communications. Inc. OneLink Comm., Inc. RM Working Assets Funding Service XO Coms. Services, Inc.

X2Comm, Inc.

Yucca Coms. Systems L D ANPI Business, LLC Alltel Comms, of the SW

Holdings, Inc.

Smith Bagley/Cellular One NE AZ

PVT Wireless Limited Partnership Northern New Mexico, LP

T-Mobile West LLC CommNet Cellular Inc. New Mexico RSA No. 5 LP New Mexico RSA 6-1 Partnership Verizon Wireless (VA W) LLC Sprint Spectrum LP (Sprint PCS)

**Qwest Corporation** 

MCI Communications Services MCimetro Access Trans. Services Tularosa Basin Telephone Co. Penasco Valley Telephone Coop. New Cingular Wireless PCS Dell Telephone Cooperative, Inc. PVT Networks, Inc

LaJicarita Rural Telephone Coop. Mescalero Apache Telcom, Inc Baca Valley Telephone Company Centurytel of the Southwest- NM Big River Telephone Company ENMR Telephone Coop., Inc.

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Truphone, Inc.

Velocity, Greatest Phone Co. Axia Technology Partners, LLC CTC Communications Corp Callcatchers Inc Freedom Voice Windstream NuVox, Inc.

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EnTelegent Solutions, Inc. Cebridge Acquisition LP First Contact Comm., LLC Go Solo Tech. of Florida One YMax Communications Globalstar USA LLC

jrenneker@nos.com; jessica.salazar@ntscom.com; sblackwell@telecertinc.com; rsemyono@wafs.com: Kelly.Faul@xo.com: tina@x2comm.com; luther@vucca.net: mary buley@inteliquent.com;

steve.delgado@verizon.com: maustin@cellularoneaz.com;

dgarcia@PVT.com

steve.delgado@verizon.com: Amy.Ray@T-Mobile.com; steve.delgado@verizon.com: steve.delgado@verizon.com: steve.delgado a verizon.com; steve delgado@verizon.com: AI B Clark@sprint.com: donnie.aultman@centurylink.com. eugene.c.wu@verizon.com; eugene.c.wu@verizon.com: jbeug@tbtc.net;

dgarcia@pvt.com: ng4692@att.com; ruben a dellcity.com: dgarcia@pvt.com: dgray@lajicarita.com; skoreny@matinetworks.net; kimbyt a bacavalley.com:

donnie.aultman@CenturyLink.com: mdiebold@bigrivertelephone.com;

alanh@plateautel.com: dsnider@leaco.org; rc2167@att.com;

mark@esilongwood.com; lindacieco a bt com; compliance@telmate.com. reg@qlinkwireless.com: Brian.Spencer@vonage.com: Fred@nexvortex.com; mark@csilongwood.com: runderwood@intermedia.net: james.wild@truphone.com; irabig@fastekteam.com: jason@axiatp.com;

tracey.l.giles@windstream.com;

Compliance@freedomvoice.com: tracey, 1.giles@windstream.com; dhutchins a fusionconnect.com; Cathryn.Smith@Leve13.com; kelly.jesel@telrite.com: carl.billek@corp.idt.net; hdevaney@chitchatusa.com; carol.owen@voicerunner.com: mark@csilongwood.com: jrabig@fastekteam.com; tking a tmine.com: sfine@broadsoft.com: kmh@CommplianceGroup.com: kseefus@rteteam.net: Dennis.Moffit@alticeusa.com: chad@firstcontactvoip.com: mark@csilongwood.com: cfiola@tmine.com: erwin.wilson@globalstar.com:

Sacred Wind Comms., Inc Multiline Long Distance, Inc Stratus Networks, Inc. Consumer Cellular Inc KDDI America Inc First Communications, LLC New Horizons Comms. Corp.

Leaco Rural Telephone Coop ILEC Division

Comcast Phone of New Mexico Cause Based Commerce, Inc Granite Telecommunications OnStarLLC

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Locus Telecomms., LLC Cytracom, LLC Access Technologies, Inc.

Lobo Internet Services, Ltd BA Telecom

ap@sacredwindnm.com: atreder@bossys.com: jpetrakis@acc2go.com; jilll@consumercellular.com; rt@kddia.com:

dant@salestaxassociates.com: enelson@nhcgrp.com: dsnider@leaco.org;

amee\_hartman@cable.comcast.com:

mark@esilongwood.com; taxdept a granitenet.com: OnStar Taxía gm.com; vwilliams@iwirelesshome.com: mark@esilongwood.com: shaun@norstartelecom.com: taxdept@sagetelecom.net; Jarrod.Harper@windstream.com; tamarag@locus.net;

showsare@firstchoicetele.com: compliance@epowerc.com; patrick@crockerlawfirm.com: jriley@telecompliance net;

tludy@ingts.com:

KARichardson@KPMG.com: tina.sylvester@dish.com; mok@alliancegrp.com; taxcompliance@interfacesys.com;

acopeman@ldcb.net;

james.lamoureux/a microsoft.com: marvanne@campustvs.com; steve@dialpad.com;

 $lara.nelson @\,momentum telecom.com;$ noel.hutton@tdstelecom.com; mark@csilongwood.com;

communicationonlinefiling@avalara.com

gregs@bdc-llc.com;

RichardPelly@plintronamericas.com: michelle.zimmerman@synety.com; david@icommerceservices.com: bmuser@distcomp.com;

Tax@Star2Star.com: bill@blueotech.net: brussell@dmv.com; jrobs@simplevoip.us: wayne a 2talk.com. twelsh@affiliatedinc.net: gfinkel@allianttech.com; rdube@sangoma.com; rkooistra@corp.earthlink.com; mauricio@ freedompop com; jim.tate@seniortechlle.com; tina.tecce@magicjack.com: tiffaney@telagility.biz: andy@balholm.com: jeffrey.ginsburg@hughes.com;

ttecce@broadsmart.com; dmunise à republicwireless.com: mcarter@securedretail.com; Roberta Kraus@lycamobile.com:

jmoon@Go2tech.com njgomez@locus.net: tax@evtracom.com; Marybeth.Hale@atisw.com:

carl'a lobo.net: ggrinham @ ultra.me; ITC Global Networks, LLC

Lunar Labs, Inc. Zang Inc. DP Access, LLC

U.S. TelePacific Corp dba TPx Communications

Carol Clifford Loretta Baca Richard Zarate Kirk Lee Paula Foley Jenica L. Jacobi Mark A. Ozanick Sonia Mendoza

Robert Lundin Kyle J. Smith Alicia Wade-King Jennifer Keen Kelly Hebbard Melanie O'Reilly

Ken Smith-PRC Judi Ushio Sunny J. Nixon Walter Haase

Keven Groenewold Daniel Najjar

Central New Mexico Electric

Matthew Collins Central Valley Electric Charles T. Pinson Wade Nelson Columbus Electric Chris Martinez Randy Massey

Continental Divide Electric

Robert Castillo Corina Sandoval

Farmers' Electric Cooperative, Inc.

Lance Adkins Kit Carson Electric Luis Reyes Andrew Gonzales Lea County Electric Bobby Ferris

Mora-San Miguel Electric

Les Montoya Robert Quintana

Northern Rio Arriba Electric

Benjamin Leyba Otero County Electric Mario Romero Charles Mulcock

Roosevelt County Electric

Antonio Sanchez Sierra Electric Denise Barrera Socorro Electric Joseph Herrera Anne Dorough Southwestern Electric Travis Sullivan Springer Electric David Spradlin

Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association

Mike McInnes

Western Farmers Electric

pritter@ironton.com; michael@joinlunar.com; jmctiernan@avava.com: tom.buckle@dpaccess.com: twolford@tpx com; carol@thejonesfirm.com; LBaca a lire.com: rzarate@solixinc.com; Kirk.lee@ftr.com; legal.request@elnk.com: jjacobi a CABQ.gov: mozanick@gvnw.com; smendoza@leaco.org: rlundin@nmag.gov;

kvle.j.smith124.civ@mail.mil: alicia Wade@cable.comcast.com; support@cedametworks.com; khebbard@fasttrackcomm.net; mporeilly@matinetworks.net: Ken.Smith1@state.nm.us; jushio@gvnw.com; snixon@rodey.com; walterh@ntua.com;

kgroenewold@nmelectric.coop dnajjarā virtuelaw.com: enmecboard@enmec.org: matthew.collins@cnmec.org: ajolsen@h2olawyers.com: cpinson@cvecoop.org: WNelson@evecoop.org: general@col-coop.com: chrism@col.coop.com; masseyfarm@vtc.net; bob@rf-lawfirm.com: reastillo@edec.coop;

esandoval@cdec coop; fec@fecnm.org: lance@fecnm.org. hr r'ā kitearson.com: lreyes@kitcarson.com. agonzales@kitcarson.com: nmewell@newelllawnm.com; bferris@lcecnet.com: lwiggins@wwwlaw.us; lmontoya@morasanmiguel.coop;

quintanafarms@msn.com:

nora a noraelectric.org: bleyba@noraelectric.org: s.t.overstreet.law@gmail.com; marior@ote-coop.com: charliem@ote-coop.com: rcec@rcec.coop: sancheza@rcec.coop: sierra@secpower.com: deniseb@sccpower.com; service@socorroelectric.com; jherrera@socorroelectric.com: district5 a socorroelectric.com: gary@alsuplawoffice.com; tsullivan@swec-coop.org; dsmith9346@zialink.com; spradlin@springercoop.com; kreif@tristategt.org; mmcinnes@tristategLorg;

b\_hobbs@wfec.com;

Gary Roulet Duncan Valley Electric Steven Lunt Navopache Electric Chuck Moore Jemez Mountain Electric Nathan Duran Daniel Najjar Carla Najar Matejka Santillanes Daniel Meszler Sam Ray Paul Briesh Peggy Martinez-Rael Elizabeth Ramirez Jose Lovato M. Poche Nadine Varela Peter Gould Leo Baca Chris Barron Gilbert Fuentes Jay Santillanes Nicole Nicolaou Jason Marks Carl Erhart

Doug Kitch

g\_roulet@wfec.com; kimberly@dvec.org: stevel@dvec.org: ggouker@navopache.org: cmoore@navopache.org; ajchavez@jemezcoop.org: nduran@jemezcoop.org: vnajjar@aol.com; csnajjar@virtuelaw.com: matejkaray@yahoo.com; dmeszler@wnmt.com: yeiya@bacavalley.com; paulbyt@bacavalley.net; Peggy.Martinez-Rael@state.nm.us; Elizabeth Ramirez a state.nm.us; lovato@kitearson.com: mpoche@kitcarson.com; nvarela@kitcarson.com; pgouldlaw@gmail.com: Leo.Baca @CenturyLink.com; cbarron@alexicon.net: GilbertT.Fuentes@state.nm.us; jaysantillanes@yahoo.com: nnicolaou@sacredwindnm.com: lawoffice@iasonmarks.com: CE6043@FTR.com: dkitch@alexicon.net;

### Respectfully Submitted,

### JALBRIGHT LAW, LLC

By: /s/ Jeffrey H. Albright
Jeffrey H. Albright
JAlbright Law, LLC
201 Third St NW Suite 1880
Albuquerque NM 87102
(505) 926-4105
JA@ Jalblaw.com
Attorney for CTIA