

The role of telecommunications in the relief efforts after hurricane Katrina and Rita were critical and volunteer WISPs were the first responders to bring services online in many of the affected areas. There was such widespread devastation of critical communications infrastructure that many people did not have a means of communications at all. WISPs and related technology efforts worked feverishly to help bring VOIP telephone service, computers and Internet access to those in shelters and even aid workers and FEMA staff. This critical link to federal online resources, registration to online search databases and phone calls to loved ones, insurance companies, aid agencies and government resources helped thousands of people on the road to putting their lives back together. This work was done largely as volunteer efforts using donated equipment operating in unlicensed frequencies.

The 04-186 proceeding is important to this story because of one clear shortcoming that WISPs have to deal with every single day. WISPs do not have adequate spectrum to operate their networks as effectively as they could with television channel space. The bandspace that have been set aside for unlicensed use until now have begun a frenzy of activity in telecommunications never before matched. Services, products and technologies have blossomed from the availability of unlicensed spectrum adding billions into the U.S. economy but the bands we have are not enough and the ability to penetrate through foliage or other obstruction at higher frequencies with lower power make these bands hard to operate in as effectively as we could with proper spectrum for broadband deployment. The physics of the frequencies making up the over the air television bands make them ideal for broadband deployment.

The end result of the WISP lack of access to usable bands with better propagation is that many who could have been served in gulf affected areas were not served at all, by anyone. Heavily treed areas or areas simply beyond the radio line of sight of the unlicensed bands we use made access to those who needed help difficult if not impossible in some cases. Sometimes those who were served took longer to get service because of the need to run extra equipment to overcome line of sight issues which led to delays.

The story is simple. If WISPs have access to unused unlicensed television bands the explosion of broadband alternatives will make efforts to bring communications into disaster relief areas a simple matter to address. There are thousands of small WISP operators who strive to be the broadband operator of choice for their small part of the country. These generally middle-class entrepreneur operators thrive in any environment, especially rural areas. We had several operators involved in the Katrina and Rita affected areas who were local WISP operators within the affected area they helped serve. They were some of the first people to help bring the telecommunications infrastructure back to life. WISPs are a good neighbor to have in disaster situations and they need unused television channel space to help.

Your average WISP operator could easily be thought of as an equivalent business to a new millennium family farmer. They just need a little ground (spectrum) to grow on. Selling off agricultural ground in large chunks to a mere handful of highest bidders instead of supporting the thousands of family farmers in the U.S. would be considered a foolish path but that is what is being contemplated with the unused television spectrum.

Middle-class backed operations cannot play in the auction game. We do not need a telecommunications industry made up of spectrum "haves" and "have nots". We need middle class spectrum policy. Making good spectrum available to unlicensed broadband operations is a good start and I support 04-186 as a step toward a spectrum middle-class that America so disparately needs to thrive and become the number one broadband adopting country in the world.

Give WISPs these unused television channels and we will get broadband access to every American in two years. I am confident we can accomplish this challenge in our industry.