

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
Expanding the Economic and Innovation Opportunities of Spectrum Through Incentive Auctions)	GN Docket No. 12-268
)	
Amendment of the Commission's Rules with Regard to Commercial Operations in the 1695-1710 MHz, 1755-1780 MHz and 2155-2180 MHz Bands)	GN Docket No. 13-185
)	
To: The Commission)	

REPLY COMMENTS OF PINE BELT CELLULAR, INC.

Pine Belt Cellular, Inc. (“Pine Belt”),¹ by its attorneys, hereby files these reply comments in response to comments filed by various parties with regard to the *Public Notice*² released by the Wireless Telecommunications Bureau (“Bureau”) of the Federal Communications Commission (“FCC” or “Commission”) seeking comments on the Competitive Carriers Association (“CCA”) proposal³ to adopt Partial Economic Areas (“PEAs”) to award licenses in the 600 MHz Broadcast Incentive Auction. The *Public Notice* also sought comment on any additional geographic licensing proposals, including the joint proposal submitted by the

¹ Pine Belt is a small family-owned provider of cellular and personal communications services to rural and non-rural incumbent local exchange areas in Alabama.

² *Wireless Telecommunications Bureau Seeks Comment on a Proposal to License the 600 MHz Band Using “Partial Economic Areas,”* GN Docket Nos. 12-268 and 13-185, Public Notice, DA 13-2351 (WTB, Dec. 11, 2013) (“*Public Notice*”).

³ Letter from Rebecca Murphy Thompson, General Counsel, Competitive Carriers Association, to Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary, FCC (Nov. 27, 2013) (“CCA PEA Ex Parte”); *see also* Letter from C. Sean Spivey, Competitive Carriers Association, to Marlene Dortch, Secretary, FCC (Dec. 23, 2013) (“CCA Revised PEA Ex Parte”).

Rural Wireless Association, Inc. (“RWA”) and NTCA – The Rural Broadband Association (“NTCA”)⁴ to conduct a two-phased Incentive Auction.

Pine Belt agrees with commenters’ widespread support⁵ for the use of Cellular Market Areas (“CMAs”), rather than Economic Areas (“EAs”), as the geographic license area for the Broadcast Incentive Auction. As discussed below, CMAs would provide Pine Belt the most meaningful opportunity to participate in the Incentive Auction. However, in the event that the Commission decides against using CMAs as the auction’s geographic license area, Pine Belt believes that the RWA/NTCA Proposal is the best alternative to encourage robust industry-wide auction participation.⁶ As they are currently proposed, PEAs remain too large for many small and rural carriers, like Pine Belt, to effectively compete for auctioned licenses.

I. SECTION 309(j) OF THE ACT REQUIRES THE COMMISSION TO ADOPT RULES AND PROCEDURES THAT PROMOTE INCENTIVE AUCTION PARTICIPATION OF RURAL CARRIERS.

Pine Belt agrees with the Comments filed by RWA, NTCA, the Blooston Rural

⁴ Letter from Caressa Bennet, Rural Wireless Association, Inc., and Jill Canfield, NTCA - The Rural Broadband Association to Marlene Dortch, Secretary, FCC (Dec. 6, 2013) (“RWA/NTCA Proposal”).

⁵ See, e.g., Joint Association Comments; Supplemental Comments of Competitive Carriers Association, *Expanding the Economic and Innovation Opportunities of Spectrum Through Incentive Auctions, Amendment of the Commission’s Rules with Regard to Commercial Operations in the 1695-1710 MHz, 1755-1780 MHz, and 2155-2180 MHz Bands*, GN Docket Nos. 12-268 & 13-185 (filed Jan. 9, 2014) (“CCA Comments”); Comments of the Blooston Rural Carriers, GN Docket Nos. 12-268 & 13-185 (filed Jan. 9, 2014) (“Blooston Comments”); Comments of Peoples Telephone Cooperative, Inc., GN Docket Nos. 12-268 & 13-185 (filed Jan. 9, 2014) (“Peoples Comments”); Comments of King Street Wireless, L.P., GN Docket Nos. 12-268 & 13-185 (filed Jan. 9, 2014); Comments of United States Cellular Corporation, GN Docket Nos. 12-268 & 13-185 (filed Jan. 9, 2014).

⁶ Under the RWA/NTCA Proposal, the Commission would conduct the reverse broadcast auction contemporaneously with the initial auction phase. During this phase, forward auction bidders would bid on the basis of EAs, but receive licenses covering only the MSA or MSAs (when there is more than one MSA) located within the relevant EA. After bidding is completed in the initial auction phase, the remaining 428 Rural Service Areas (“RSAs”) would be auctioned in the second auction phase. RWA/NTCA Proposal at p. 2.

Carriers and others that neither the use of EAs, nor CCA’s PEA approach, would adequately address the Commission’s obligations under Section 309(j) of the Communications Act of 1934, as amended (“the Act”).⁷ Section 309(j) requires the Commission to adopt auction and service rules, license sizes, and bandwidth assignments that, among other things, (1) ensure the timely deployment of new services to people residing in rural areas;⁸ (2) promote economic opportunity and competition;⁹ (3) ensure new technologies are readily available to the public by avoiding the excessive concentration of licenses;¹⁰ (4) disseminate licenses to a wide variety of applicants, including small businesses and rural telephone companies;¹¹ (5) prevent stockpiling or warehousing of spectrum;¹² and (6) promote an equitable distribution of licenses among different geographic areas and promote economic opportunities for small businesses and rural carriers.¹³ As discussed below, if the Commission was to adopt EAs and (to a lesser extent) PEAs as the Incentive Auction’s geographic license area, many small and rural carriers would be unable to participate. As a result, the Commission would contravene the Section 309(j) requirements put in place to promote provider diversity and encourage rural wireless deployment.

II. COMMISSION USE OF EAs AS GEOGRAPHIC LICENSE AREAS WOULD PREVENT PINE BELT FROM PARTICIPATING IN THE INCENTIVE AUCTION.

While Pine Belt supports the Commission’s use of geographic license areas, the use of large geographic license areas such as EAs will prevent Pine Belt from participating in the Incentive Auction. Pine Belt currently provides service to portions of eight rural Alabama

⁷ See, e.g., Joint Association Comments at pp. 5-6; Blooston Comments at pp. 1, 6.

⁸ 47 U.S.C. § 309(j)(3)(A).

⁹ 47 U.S.C. § 309(j)(3)(B).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² 47 U.S.C. § 309(j)(4)(B).

¹³ 47 U.S.C. § 309(j)(4)(C). See also Joint Association Comments at p. 6.

counties with a total population of approximately 140,000 people. In order to cover its existing service footprint, Pine Belt would have to bid on spectrum across four EAs, covering well over four million people. Realistically, Pine Belt cannot compete under such a scenario. Indeed, in order to match its current licensed footprint, Pine Belt would be forced in an auction scenario to acquire spectrum covering not just vast portions of Alabama, but also portions of Louisiana and Mississippi, two states in which Pine Belt provides no service and has no customers. The four EAs that Pine Belt would be required to successfully bid on in a forward auction (just to match its current, modest licensed footprint) include the major cities of Birmingham, Mobile and Montgomery, Alabama as well as Jackson, Mississippi. The simple truth is that if new spectrum is made available only on an EA basis, Pine Belt would be unable to bid successfully.

Pine Belt is not alone. The Summit Ridge Group, based on an analysis of letters to the FCC, has identified 12 local carriers that will not participate in the auction if an EA structure is used exclusively for licensing 600 MHz spectrum.¹⁴ The NERA Report identified several additional rural carriers for which the use of EA geographic licensing areas would make Incentive Auction participation difficult, if not impossible.¹⁵

¹⁴ William Lehr and J. Armand Musey, *Right-sizing Spectrum Auction Licenses: The Case for Smaller Geographic License Areas in the TV Broadcast Incentive Auction*, at p. 17 (Nov. 20, 2013) (“Summit Study”). See also Richard Marsden, Dr. Chantale LaCasse, and Jonathan Pike, *Local and Regional Licensing for the US 600 MHz Band (Incentive Auction)*, at p. 13 (January 2014) (“NERA Report”).

¹⁵ NERA Report at pp. 14-15.

III. AS CURRENTLY PROPOSED, PEAs WILL NOT MAXIMIZE AUCTION PARTICIPATION.

Though PEAs would be a better geographic license area option than EAs, Pine Belt agrees with other commenters that CCA's current PEA proposal does not adequately address the concerns many small and rural carriers have regarding the size of the licenses to be auctioned.¹⁶ As the Blooston Rural Carriers make clear, because PEA boundaries in Midwestern and Western states largely follow current EA boundaries, states such as North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, and Nevada would see little improvement from the use of PEAs under the current CCA proposal instead of EAs.¹⁷ For providers in these states, and several others, use of PEAs would preclude auction participation in much the same way as EAs.

For its part, Pine Belt would have to bid on four PEAs covering over 800,000 people in order to cover its service area, a population five times the population currently covered by its footprint. If the Commission were to adopt CMA-based licenses instead, Pine Belt would only have to bid on two CMAs covering less than 270,000 people, allowing Pine Belt to be much more competitive. So while the use of CMAs would necessitate that Pine Belt bid successfully on two CMAs covering 14 counties (six more than it currently covers today), this option is still far more favorable than one requiring Pine Belt to bid successfully on four PEAs that cover a total of 26 counties, two-thirds of which Pine Belt has no intention of competing in.

¹⁶ See Blooston Comments at pp. 1-2 (noting that the use of PEAs would “offer inadequate improvement over EA licensing for the many Blooston Rural Carriers that provide service in the West and Midwestern states”); see also Peoples Comments at pp. 2-3 (stating that a PEA overlapping portions of its study area is too large, and use of PEA geographic license areas may preclude its participation in the Incentive Auction).

¹⁷ Blooston Comments at p. 5. PEAs in Texas pose similar issues for at least some carriers. See Peoples Comments at pp. 2-3.

IV. THE RWA/NTCA PROPOSAL WOULD ALLOW FOR ROBUST AUCTION PARTICIPATION BY ALL CARRIERS, INCLUDING PINE BELT.

In the event the Commission decides against using all 734 CMAs as geographic license areas in a single phase auction, Pine Belt believes that the alternative RWA/NTCA Proposal will maximize carrier participation and offer the best opportunity for a successful Incentive Auction. The two-phase Incentive Auction framework would allow the Commission to conduct the reverse broadcast auction, spectrum repacking, and a First Phase Forward Auction on the basis of 176 EAs, but award licenses on the basis of MSAs.¹⁸ A Second Phase Forward Auction would auction the remaining 428 RSAs. Although the use of CMAs would best allow Pine Belt and other small and rural carriers to compete for licenses in the Incentive Auction, under the RWA/NTCA Proposal, Pine Belt would be able to participate in the Incentive Auction and reasonably compete for the licenses necessary for it to timely deploy new services to the people who live, work and travel through Pine Belt's rural service area.

V. CONCLUSION.

Pine Belt strongly encourages the Commission to adopt CMAs when awarding these valuable 600 MHz licenses. In the event that the Commission decides to use an alternative geographic licensing scheme, Pine Belt supports the RWA/NTCA Proposal. Only by adopting licensing areas that are sufficiently small to provide small and rural carriers, such as Pine Belt, a meaningful opportunity to participate in the Incentive Auction will the Commission meet the statutory mandate of Section 309(j) of the Act.

¹⁸ See Joint Association Comments at p. 10.

Respectfully submitted,

PINE BELT CELLULAR, INC.

By: /s/ Daryl A. Zakov
Daryl A. Zakov
Erin P. Fitzgerald

Bennet & Bennet, PLLC
6124 MacArthur Boulevard
Bethesda, MD 20816
(202) 371-1500

Its Attorneys

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