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FCC ISO “Outdoor Alerting”

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Congress has laid the groundwork for a ten million dollar program that requires three federal agencies to cooperatively establish grants for “outdoor alerting technologies in remote communities.” The program is part of the SAFE Port Act, passed during October 2006, and is ostensibly directed at ensuring that emergency alerts can be issued to rural communities that lack mobile phone service.

The FCC must take the first crack at the program by defining what qualifies as: (1) a remote community; (2) an underserved community; and (3) a commercial mobile service. Perhaps because ten million dollars in funding will not go very far toward remotely alerting vast areas of the United States to impending danger, only two companies commented on the FCC’s definitions. Both companies generally supported the FCC proposals.

The FCC has suggested that a rural community is the same as a “rural area.” FCC rules define a rural area as those counties with a population density of 100 persons per square mile or fewer. Similarly, the FCC relies upon its pre-existing definition of “commercial mobile service” which defines the service as any interconnected mobile service that is operated for profit and available to the public. Finally, the FCC leaves open the definition of an “underserved” area.

Once the FCC has defined all of the terms, it will turn the matter over to the Commerce Department. Congress envisions that the Commerce Department will work with the Homeland Security Department to dole out up to \$10,000,000 for outdoor alerting technologies – a technology which remains undefined. Readers with interests in rural areas may wish to follow the program as it develops and may also want to seek funding from the Commerce Department to deploy such system. However, other than the grant funds, it is unclear what revenue would be generated by an outdoor alerting technology. More interestingly, while outdoor alerting generally is considered civil defense sirens and loud speakers for populated areas, uncertainty exists how residents of rural areas would receive emergency alerts from such systems.