

FCC Takes Action on Rural Call Completion Problems

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The FCC today adopted an order aimed at minimizing long-distance call completion problems in rural areas. The order includes [new reporting requirements for long-distance carriers](#) and a rule preventing long-distance carriers from sending a ring tone to a caller before the call has been delivered to the called party.

“In rural America an alarming number of calls are not being completed,” said FCC Acting Chairwoman Mignon Clyburn at today’s monthly FCC meeting, where the order was adopted.

“Today we take our biggest step yet toward fixing the problem,” she added.

The order takes several actions, including:

- Long-distance carriers that made the initial choice about how to route the call and that have more than 100,000 subscribers will be required to retain data about call completion rates for six months and file quarterly reports about this to the FCC. According to the FCC, carriers serving 95% of U.S. phone lines would be required to report. Calls to areas served by rural carriers will be compared with calls to metro areas to gauge where problems may exist.
- Carriers that will have to report include wireless carriers and VoIP providers as well as traditional long-distance carriers.
- Data to be collected includes call attempts, calls answered, calls that received a busy signal, calls that generated an unassigned number signal, and calls where the caller heard a ringing sound but there was no answer.
- Long-distance carriers that demonstrate they have adopted certain “best practices” can request a waiver that reduces their reporting requirements. An example of a best practice is to use no more than two intermediate carriers between themselves and the local carrier serving the called party.
- The order also prohibits long-distance carriers from sending a ring tone to a caller before the call has been delivered to the called party. When this occurs, the caller may think no one answered the call when someone actually was home to answer it. And if the caller learns that the called party was home at the time and did not hear a ring, both parties may assume the problem is with the local carrier when it is not.

Several studies have shown that [calls to rural areas often do not reach the called party](#) because the call is dropped, a ringtone is sent prematurely, or for other reasons. The reasons this situation has arisen were not discussed at today’s meeting but evidence suggests that some long-distance carriers – or intermediate carriers that terminate calls for the long-distance companies — deliberate try to [prevent calls from going through](#) in order to avoid paying per-minute termination charges to the rural carrier serving the called party. Those charges tend to be higher in rural areas to help cover the cost of delivering service in those areas, which generally are more costly to serve than metro markets.



Today's order also includes a further notice of proposed rulemaking that seeks additional comment about the impact of auto dialers on call completion and other issues — such as whether the FCC should adopt rules to clarify the scope of call blocking rules.

One FCC commissioner noted that there is still more work to be done on rural call completion. "Today's action alone is unlikely to solve rural call completion problems," said Commissioner Ajit Pai. He noted, however that a variety of organizations also are working on the problem, including the Alliance for Telecommunications Industry Solutions, NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association, the National Exchange Carrier Association, the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners and others.

"Through [these] collective efforts, we hope we will solve the problem as soon as possible," said Pai.

Image courtesy of flickr user [drewleavy](#).