

Prepared Statement of Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell

Vice Chairman - Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Joint Hearing of the Senate Indian Affairs & Commerce Committees

Re: Indian Tribal Telecommunications Issues

May 14, 2002

253 Russell Senate Office Building

Good morning and thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you for scheduling today's hearing on telecommunication in Indian country.

Since the arrival of the Internet over twenty years ago, every American surely recognizes its potential to improve our economy and our standard of living.

In general, the availability of telecommunications and information technology in Indian communities is not the rarity it was ten years ago.

In fact, a sizeable — and growing — number of the tribes are involved in telecommunications.

Tribal involvement ranges from connecting Indian schools to the Internet to tribes regulating and operating telecommunications services on Indian reservations.

The "Telecommunications Revolution" has not reached nearly enough Indian communities and it is affecting people:

~ only 39% of Indian households have telephones compared to 94% of non-Native households;

~ law enforcement officers are dying because of poor communications equipment;

~ Indian kids are not being connected to the world via the Internet as other American kids are;

~ Health care to rural areas like "the Bush" in Alaska is made more difficult; and

~ the business sector is walking away because of the lack of physical infrastructure on Native lands.

In Native and non-Native communities, telecommunications is the backbone to development. The weak economic base in much of Indian America — especially for the “Plains tribes” of the Upper Midwest — make it difficult to support infrastructure investment.

For many private communications firms, it is simply not profitable to provide services to the vast expanse of Native American lands.

In turn, the lack of physical infrastructure makes it difficult for these same Native communities to undertake and attract successful economic development initiatives.

As we will hear today, there is reason for hope. Tribes, tribal organizations and the business sector are all focusing on the issue and looking to broaden technology options for tribes and helping them develop a physical telecommunications infrastructure.

While we are years away from getting all of Indian America “on line”, I know this hearing will help the members of our Committees learn and appreciate the next steps we need to take in order to see each and every Native American community an economically viable entity.

With that I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

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