

Sept. 24, 2020

Senators Press FirstNet, AT&T on Rural Deployment

Members of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee's communications, technology, innovation, and the Internet subcommittee pressed First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) and AT&T, Inc., representatives today about when there will be greater rural deployment of the nationwide public safety broadband network.

At a hearing this morning, senators also asked FirstNet how the authority and carrier have responded to a Government Accountability Office report that said that FirstNet lacks information on how satisfied users of the network are and that users are dissatisfied with the quality of information they have received from FirstNet. Lawmakers also said that the COVID-19 pandemic was the first true test of the FirstNet system. And they discussed the need to allocate funding for nationwide next-generation (NG-911) deployment, which they said could work in tandem with the FirstNet system.

The FirstNet and AT&T officials said they are pleased with the progress of rural deployment so far, but they noted that more work is needed and the AT&T representative asked Congress to make it easier to site on federal lands. FirstNet Chief Executive Officer Ed Parkinson said it would be impossible to deploy the network to "every square inch of the United States."

"Today, our nationwide Band 14 coverage build is more than eighty percent (80%) complete and ahead of schedule, and usage has exponentially grown – with more than 13,000 first responder and supporting organizations having subscribed and over 1.5 million FirstNet connections now in service," said Jason Porter, senior vice president-FirstNet for AT&T.

Mr. Porter said that FirstNet has particularly shown its worth during the COVID-19 pandemic. "It's like a fire, flood, and tornado in every city across the country at the same time," he said, while also noting that the network has been called upon during wildfires, hurricanes, and tornadoes – a fact that some senators said they appreciated.

He and Mr. Parkinson noted that AT&T faces rural build-out milestones in each phase of its initial five-year deployment. AT&T plans to deploy more than 1,000 new cell sites as part of the initial construction, mostly in rural areas, and more than 250 sites have been built so far, Mr. Porter said.

Mr. Porter, who recited cell site and Band 14 deployment data for subcommittee members as they asked questions at the hearing, commended subcommittee Chairman John Thune (R., S.D.) for introducing, with subcommittee ranking member Brian Schatz (D., Hawaii), the STREAMLINE Small Cell Deployment Act (S 1699) (*TR Daily*, June 3, 2019). He said that state and local siting can be difficult, but he singled out federal lands as a particular problem.

“They can take years to get access and rights. ... And so it’s that time of approval that is the biggest challenge for us in continuing to deploy and cover rural America,” Mr. Porter said.

Another witness, Pennington County, S.D., Sheriff’s Office Capt. Tony Harrison, also stressed the importance of eliminating obstacles to cell site deployments, especially on federal lands. He said that sites currently under construction would greatly boost connectivity in the Black Hills of South Dakota. “For us, time is the enemy,” he said. But he praised FirstNet for its assistance, including during a visit by President Trump to Mount Rushmore for the July 4 holiday.

“Is the FirstNet solution the perfect solution? It is not. There is not a perfect solution out there, and we know that,” Mr. Harrison said.

Senator after senator at the hearing wanted to know when rural coverage – for FirstNet subscribers as well as the general public – would be improved.

Sen. Jon Tester (D., Mont.) asked how FirstNet would ensure that “every corner of a state like mine will be covered.”

Mr. Parkinson noted that Congress has required “significant rural milestones” in each phase of initial network deployment. But he said that he can’t “say that every square inch of the United States is going to be covered. No carrier will ever do that.”

However, he noted that FirstNet and AT&T will not stop after the initial period, which ends in 2023, noting that the contract between the two entities is for 25 years. “This will continue,” he added.

Mr. Tester said he is glad that AT&T plans to serve first responders across the country, but he added “that AT&T’s coverage in Montana has been heading in the wrong direction. There are big parts of northeastern Montana where you used to be able to get AT&T service and today you cannot.” He asked if consumers would have better coverage once AT&T deploys the FirstNet system in his state.

Mr. Porter said that every time AT&T deploys Band 14 equipment, the general public will be able to access that spectrum “as a secondary user” when it is not being utilized by first responders. In addition, when public safety equipment is deployed, AT&T also will deploy equipment for its commercial network, Mr. Porter said.

“In recent months, FirstNet had its first true nationwide stress test” with the pandemic, including providing broadband at COVID-19 testing centers, emergency medical sites, and to 911 dispatchers working from home, Sen. Schatz said. The senator, who praised FirstNet’s response during the eruption of a volcano in Hawaii, asked when FirstNet will realize “total connectivity.”

Mr. Parkinson replied that there has been a “dramatic increase” in broadband access to public agencies so far and that service will continue to be upgraded. But he didn’t answer the question directly.

Sen. Deb Fischer (R., Neb.) said that some rural stakeholders in her state have expressed “some apprehension” on FirstNet’s reliance on deployables instead of permanent networks. She asked Mr. Harrison how cells on wheels (COWs) have worked for his state. He said very well. The senator said she was pleased that AT&T deployed a cell on light truck for flooding in Nebraska.

Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R., Tenn.) noted that FirstNet deployed equipment after tornadoes in her state and asked about the use of apps where there is no broadband coverage or cell service. “AT&T still has large gaps in their fiber or their high speed internet systems,” Ms. Blackburn said, “even in suburban areas.”

Mr. Porter noted that there are more than 125 mobile apps in the FirstNet apps ecosystem. However, those apps would require connectivity and would only be available to FirstNet subscribers.

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R., W.Va.) asked whether FirstNet was on track to meet the goals in his updated road map, which was released last year (*TR Daily*, Aug. 13, 2019). Mr. Parkinson said it plans to update the document again next month.

Sen. Thune noted that the GAO report, which said that FirstNet should strengthen its oversight of the network (*TR Daily*, Jan. 27), “found that AT&T does not collect enough robust data around the satisfaction of the end-user: the very groups who will at the end of the day be depending upon the FirstNet system to do their jobs. I share GAO’s view that FirstNet’s lack of formal insight into end-users’ satisfaction could ultimately affect the long-term success of the program.”

He asked Mr. Parkinson what FirstNet has done in response to the report.

Mr. Parkinson said it has rolled out a portal to gather input from public safety users. The portal became live this week. He also said that FirstNet was “continuing to evolve” its engagement with the public safety community and noted that it has a dedicated outreach staff. “We’re very proud about the interaction that we’ve had with public safety,” he said, but added, “I think you can always do more.”

Mr. Porter said AT&T was “excited” to work with FirstNet on GAO’s recommendations. “We’ve always got opportunity to improve,” he said, but added, “The success of FirstNet shows the demand and the excitement in public safety for FirstNet.”

“As you know, GAO reported that some stakeholders described having little contact with FirstNet or receiving insufficient information from FirstNet and AT&T,” said Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D., Conn.). However, he commended AT&T for building cell sites in his state. “But there’s still more coverage needed,” he added.

Another witness, Karima Holmes, director of the District of Columbia’s Office of Unified Communications and a FirstNet board member, said that FirstNet enabled her administrative staff, “311” agents, and non-emergency 911 call takers to telework during the pandemic with MiFi devices.- Paul Kirby, paul.kirby@wolterskluwer.com

Copyright © 2020 CCH Incorporated, All Rights Reserved