

Remarks FCC Commissioner Gloria Tristani

FCC Field Hearing in Albuquerque, New Mexico: “Overcoming Obstacles to Telephone Service for Indians on Reservations”

January 28, 1999

[as prepared for delivery]

Good morning. It's a pleasure to be back in my home state of New Mexico on official FCC business. The only thing better would be being back in New Mexico on vacation. But if I have to be working while I'm back in New Mexico, I couldn't be more pleased that I'm working on an issue that's so important to me and to many New Mexicans. It's the issue of telephone subscribership among Native Americans on reservations and pueblos.

This is a critical issue for the Native American community in New Mexico and throughout the United States. Today and in the future, basic telephone service will, at a minimum, provide instant access to emergency services. Beyond that, having a telephone simply helps a person function in society. In today's society, the telephone is integral to making a living and to staying in touch with family and friends. So when large numbers of Native Americans lack telephone service, that is cause for concern.

In addition, the lack of telephone service will increasingly affect a person's quality of life. This is because the telephone lines are what connect us to the Internet. And the Internet is quickly becoming a national town square. Everything from consumer purchases to politics to personal finance will one day be the domain of the Internet.

If you think there's a troublesome divide between the information haves and have-nots in our society today, just wait until the Internet takes hold. If you're not on the Internet in five years, your access to important information and the way you communicate with friends and relatives will be light years behind the rest of America. We cannot allow that to happen to Native Americans or to any group of Americans. That is why I am here today.

The sooner that all the stakeholders come together and address the problem of low telephone penetration on Native American lands, the more likely it will be that all Americans, including Native Americans, will be part of the telecommunications revolution. Looking over the list of participants in today's hearing, I am very pleased that so many quality people are here to help guide the FCC's thinking. But the credit for making today's hearing a reality goes to Chairman Kennard. He has made Native American issues a priority for his administration and has devoted many of the FCC's talented staff to solving this problem. I commend his leadership on this important issue.

I would also note my appreciation that Congresswoman Wilson and Congressman Udall took the time to be here. Their support will be extremely helpful if we are to make any headway on this issue.

Finally, I'd like to thank those of you in the audience for your attendance and your interest in this very important issue. And my sincere appreciation to the panelists who have put a great deal of effort to be here today to share ideas on how to solve this problem. With that, I'd like to introduce Congresswoman Heather Wilson.