

Opening Statement of the Honorable Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Markup of H.R. 2566 and H.R. 2669
September 12, 2016

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Today's markup features two pro-consumer pieces of legislation that aim to ensure that consumers are able to take advantage of the benefits of technology. One bill seeks to promote call completion and quality for rural consumers. The other will protect all consumers from fraudulent or "spoofed" text messages. Both bills address real, identifiable problems, and promote effective solutions. These bipartisan measures are the kind of work that is often overlooked for 'grandeur' undertakings but in the end, have the most impact on the daily lives of our constituents.

Last week, we held a legislative hearing on the first bill we'll consider today, H.R. 2566, Improving Rural Call Quality and Reliability Act of 2015. Our witnesses shared their experiences on the front lines of rural telephone service, including the problems caused for their businesses by dropped calls.

The problem for rural customers comes when someone tries to call them, but something goes wrong. Somewhere in the handoff and delivery of traffic, calls to rural customers are being dropped or degraded. The caller continues to hear ringing on their end, but the call never makes it to the intended recipient. As our witnesses told us, this isn't just an inconvenience for them—it results in lost business or much worse.

The simplest explanation for what happens is that long-distance and voice traffic starts with one provider, who then hands the call off to a third party "router" who will ultimately deliver it to the end provider serving the person who is being called. This process is typically seamless, high-quality, and is transparent to American consumers. However, in rural and hard-to-serve areas, it can be expensive to move traffic to remote customers, so the provider who originates the call will look for the least expensive option for delivering the call. In some cases, these "least-cost routers" simply cut corners to offer the lowest prices, which means that calls can be low-quality or not connected at all.

This is a national problem affecting all of our constituents. So many of my colleagues shared letters they received or stories that their constituents shared about how call failure and poor call quality have impacted their businesses and their lives. One of our witnesses last week, Mr. Miller, operates a telephone company that serves rural customers in Ohio, and as he told us, he has lost customers over call completion issues. When his customers don't receive their calls, they get angry with him—even though he typically doesn't have any control over the path that the call must take to get to his network. In fact, he has made major upgrades to his network to improve the service his customers receive. But when Mr. Miller's customers miss a call, who do they contact? Not the least-cost router who abandoned the call traffic somewhere along the line. They call Mr. Miller, or they find a new provider. In his case, he lost a major business client because of call completion issues, despite the fact that he hadn't done anything wrong.

Today, as we consider the legislation authored by my colleague from Iowa, Mr. Young, we have an opportunity to make a significant step forward in the fight to ensure that rural customers get the same high-quality voice service that others take for granted. By requiring the network providers in the middle to adhere to service standards, we greatly improve the likelihood that calls are delivered to where they are supposed to go. And by requiring these intermediate providers to register with the FCC, we deter fraudulent bad actors that abuse the system and

drop or degrade calls. I was pleased to hear the strong bipartisan support for this measure, and I'm optimistic that this can make a big difference in the way rural consumers receive their telephone calls.

We will also consider H.R. 2669, the Anti-Spoofing Act. This bill seeks to extend the protections of the Truth in Caller ID Act to include text messages. This is the second time we've looked at this legislation that will provide additional protection for consumers, and I'm hopeful this time we will see it successfully land on the President's desk. As widespread use of text messaging becomes more prevalent, it is important that we ensure that consumers do not fall victim to "spoofing" attacks where bad actors falsify their phone numbers, often to trick the recipient into providing personal information.

One witness at the legislative hearing on this bill earlier this year perhaps explained this effort best, saying "The bill addresses a clear, demonstrated problem with carefully drafted provisions that find the often elusive sweet spot between permitting innovation, avoiding undue burden on providers, respecting privacy concerns, and providing for vigorous consumer protection."

In the end, that is exactly our job as members of Congress, and I look forward to seeing both of these bills advance.

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