

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Full Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “Strengthening American Communications Leadership with Open Radio Access Networks”

January 17, 2024

Today, this Subcommittee continues its important oversight of our communications networks by ensuring that our country and our communications companies are active participants in developing innovative wireless networks across the world.

As we discussed at a Subcommittee hearing last week on cybersecurity, our communications networks are under constant threat as they underpin a significant part of the American economy. Nearly every facet of American life relies on these networks. And as a result, our networks face threats that range from amateur hackers to sophisticated internet criminals, to foreign adversaries seeking to harm our nation. So, it’s imperative that our wireless networks are some of the most technically advanced and well-defended networks.

Over the past several years, Open Radio Access Network—or Open RAN, has developed from a concept to wide-scale deployment. Open and virtualized radio access technology promotes innovation in wireless networks. It can also introduce competition among vendors for the individual components of wireless equipment and software. This can help to counter the dominance of untrusted equipment makers like Huawei and support the development of new manufacturers, including those in the United States.

This Committee has come together on a bipartisan basis to examine supply chain security and innovations in wireless networks. We enacted the bipartisan Secure and Trusted Communications Networks Act giving the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) the authority to exclude untrusted equipment from our communications networks. We also passed the USA Telecommunications Act that created the Public Wireless Supply Chain Innovation Fund to help spur the development and deployment of Open RAN technology. This program was funded with a \$1.5 billion appropriation in the CHIPS and Science Act.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has already awarded nearly \$100 million in grants from the Wireless Innovation Fund, including announcing last week nearly \$80 million in grant awards. This funding will help build a center to test Open RAN solutions in a real-world setting and a lab dedicated to testing the performance and security of Open RAN technology. These investments are important as we work to help create a global Open RAN market where America and our allies have seats at the table.

To those that say NTIA should be awarding this funding more quickly, I’ll just remind everyone that the agency is limited by the statute in how much it can award the first year. I have confidence it is administering this fund appropriately and in a way that will produce the best

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results, including carefully examining the applications and making the awards to the projects that will do the most to help get Open RAN off the ground. I think we can all agree that is the best way to make sure taxpayer dollars are being used efficiently.

The FCC is also helping to examine Open RAN. Its Communications Security, Reliability, and Interoperability Council recently issued a report outlining how to overcome the challenges in the development of Open RAN technology. The agency also continues to study this technology and the steps needed to deploy it broadly.

Open RAN can help increase our national security and foster innovation in the wireless marketplace. But if the United States isn't a leader in shaping the wireless future, nation-states hostile to our country will step into the leadership void. This includes dominating the 5G/6G marketplace in a way that may undermine our national security and economic prosperity. We cannot allow that to happen. History has shown us that early adopters and developers of technology define the marketplace, drive innovation, and reap the economic benefits, and so we must lead.

It's also critical that we come together to ensure the Rip and Replace Program is fully funded so that we can ensure our networks are secure from malicious interference. The Secure and Trusted Communications Networks Act authorized the Rip and Replace program, but it needs an additional \$3 billion to fully rid our networks of Huawei and ZTE equipment. I also hope smaller carriers explore whether Open RAN technology is suitable for their networks so that any network equipment deemed a security threat in the future can be removed more easily. Congress should also make sure these carriers have the resources and technical assistance to leverage this technology.

I look forward to the discussion, and I yield back the balance of my time.