

**San Bernardino County Sheriff Shannon Dicus' Responses to
Rep. Fulcher's Additional Questions for the Record**

- 1. Like several counties in Idaho, San Bernardino County covers a large geographic area that includes rural areas where cellular coverage for public safety can get spotty. Sheriffs have told me they experience challenges with service losses and interoperability challenges across large geographic areas they must cover. Since AT&T has built out its network per the requirement and with others like Verizon Wireless and T-Mobile having joined the public safety communications space, are there things we can do in Congress to make it easier for sheriffs and other local public safety entities to ensure you obtain consistent coverage across large geographic areas?**

Representative Fulcher, San Bernardino County is the largest county in the nation, covering more than 20,000 square miles of mountains, deserts, and vast rural areas. No single carrier or system can guarantee complete coverage across that kind of geography. That's why our deputies operate with multiple overlapping systems. Their in-car computers carry both FirstNet and Verizon cards, so if one network drops, the other can often fill the gap. And our county still relies on our 800 MHz land mobile radio system for mission-critical voice, because that remains the backbone of reliable communication in difficult terrain.

We're encouraged by the fact that all the major providers – AT&T through FirstNet, Verizon, and T-Mobile – are moving toward satellite-based solutions. Right now, it's text messaging over satellite, but soon we'll see full voice and data capabilities. Technologies like Starlink are already showing us what's possible. In the near future, a deputy in a canyon in San Bernardino County or a sheriff in rural Idaho should be able to connect directly via satellite when there's no terrestrial coverage at all.

From Congress, what we need is continued support to keep driving this buildout. FirstNet was created for exactly this purpose – to ensure public safety has its own reliable, interoperable broadband system. Reauthorizing FirstNet is critical, not only to guarantee continuity of the program, but to ensure the contractor can continue investing in the infrastructure that will fill coverage gaps in rural counties like mine, and in large, sparsely populated areas like the ones in Idaho you mentioned. Rural America can't be an afterthought in communications. With congressional support, we can make sure these next-generation technologies are deployed equitably and with public safety in mind.

- 2. Do you face any obstacles putting your deployable equipment on federal land? This could include lack of cleared areas and trails that make it more of a challenge to locate towers and generating stations or laying fiber.**

San Bernardino County is over 80 percent federally managed land – forests, BLM lands, and military reservations. These are often the exact areas where we need coverage the most, whether it's a wildfire, a lost hiker, or a flood response. But today, we face significant obstacles in getting deployable equipment or permanent towers on federal property. The challenges aren't technical – they're bureaucratic. Federal agencies like the Forest Service or BLM often already have towers or repeaters but accessing them or co-locating our equipment can take months or years of

paperwork. Meanwhile, our deputies and their rangers may be standing shoulder to shoulder in the field without the ability to talk to one another on a common system.

A clear example in my area of responsibility in San Bernardino County would be P Mountain, or Black Peak, east of Parker, Arizona, where multiple agencies already operate communications infrastructure. San Bernardino County is trying to install upgraded communications buildings and towers there to improve interoperability for deputies, firefighters, and road crews along the Colorado River. This site is critical for mutual aid with La Paz County, fire agencies, and our Colorado River and Needles stations.

The problem is that while the Bureau of Indian Affairs owns the site, the land falls within the Colorado River Indian Tribe reservation. BIA and BLM have required us to secure tribal approval, but discussions with the involved agencies and tribal governments can sometimes come to a stall over priorities. This situation could result in critical upgrades for the region being delayed – even though this is exactly the type of project that could improve public safety communications in rural communities and our tribal communities.

In my opinion, Congress should allow local jurisdictions to have more of a say in how public safety communications infrastructure is developed and shared. Local sheriffs, fire departments, and emergency managers often have more updated and more robust systems than our federal partners, and we are ready to share those capabilities. Sometimes the federal government is simply too large and too slow to manage these needs effectively, and lives are on the line when we wait.

A common-sense congressional fix would be to require agencies to prioritize interoperability and to streamline co-location of infrastructure on federal lands. Local jurisdictions should be empowered to lead, because at the end of the day, we're the ones answering the 911 calls. Federal policy should make it easier – not harder – for us to put the right equipment in place to keep people safe.