FCC Hopes to Learn From Effort to Rebuild

$211 Million Proposed to Aid Gulf

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Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin J. Martin yesterday proposed spending about $211 million to help provide mobile phones and free minutes to Hurricane Katrina survivors without telephone service and to help rebuild the telecom infrastructure shattered by the storm.

Martin also proposed forming an independent panel to study the telecom breakdown in the region and to suggest ways to prepare better for disasters. In addition, he wants to create a new FCC bureau to focus on homeland security and public safety.

The proposals were outlined at an unusual FCC meeting held in Atlanta to hear firsthand testimony from communications officials and broadcasters still grappling with the storm's damage.

"It is our goal at the FCC to learn from the disaster. We need to determine how we can help companies strengthen their communications infrastructure, create more robust and reliable networks, and improve the ability to quickly restore service when disaster does strike," Martin said. "We also need to improve our own ability to respond in times of crisis."

Hurricane Katrina caused a virtual communications blackout in parts of the region, knocking out some 2.5 million BellSouth Corp. telephone lines, disabling more than 1,000 cell sites and drastically undermining police, fire and other emergency communications.
Conditions have improved -- BellSouth said it now has an estimated 305,000 lines out -- but it will take years to rebuild the infrastructure destroyed by the storm.

FCC Commissioner Michael J. Copps welcomed the idea of an independent panel and a separate homeland security bureau but suggested that the steps were long overdue to strengthen the country's response to disasters.

"Today the Federal Communications Commission takes some promising steps forward. It's been a long time coming -- too long," said Copps. "It's not that the commission hasn't acted in the past. It's that it hasn't done enough."

FCC officials said Martin had instructed commission staff to draft an order to spend the estimated $211 million to help hurricane survivors. This would be submitted for a vote by the commission, which is split between two Republicans and two Democrats. The plan is likely to win approval.

They said Martin planned to work with the FCC's three other commissioners on how to form the independent panel.

The FCC is required to consult with Congress on creating the new homeland security bureau, a move that would have to be submitted to commissioners for a vote.

Of the $211 million, the FCC estimated that $51 million would directly help survivors who do not have telephone service and who are eligible for federal disaster assistance. This would help to provide mobile phones and 300 free minutes and help defray the cost of eventually reconnecting them to the telephone network.

An estimated $28 million would help fund telecommunications services to health care providers working with disaster victims.

The commission also estimated it could provide about $132 million to help rebuild telecommunications at schools and libraries.

"Those are all creative, aggressive and responsive suggestions," said David Aylward, director of the ComCARE nonprofit coalition, which seeks to improve first responder communications.