

FCC Future of Media Project Workshop
Friday, April 30, 2010
Rod Bates Remarks

I'm Rod Bates, General Manager of the Nebraska Educational Telecommunications network. Thank you for engaging in this important discussion. I am honored to have been invited.

I am Chairman of the Association of Public Television Stations, representing most public television stations across the county. There are community, university and school districts licensees, and state networks.

Much of the work of public broadcasters is similar. But, I was asked to address some of the unique characteristics of state networks. There are 14 licensees that operate statewide networks. I am co-chair of the Organization of State Broadcast Executives.

Nebraska's network operates a statewide public television network and a statewide public radio network. We are members of both PBS and NPR. Our television service began in November of 1954 long before PBS was even established.

Our mission is to enrich lives and engage minds by connecting communities and celebrating Nebraska with services that educate, entertain and enlighten.

Today, more than 99 percent of the population in the United States is able to receive a free, over the air local public television service. In Nebraska as well as many other rural states, this would not have been economically feasible without the structure of a state network.

In Nebraska we have counties whose populations range from 500 to 500,000. There is no way a small rural population could sustain its own radio or television station through voluntary donations alone. But, a state network serves the entire population.

In New York City, a single tower and transmitter with a typical range of 50 miles would reach roughly 10 million people. Voluntary donations from a population of this size could sustain a public television operation. In Nebraska, we have nine transmitters, 14 translators and a satellite transponder to distribute our programs and services to less than two million people. So, a base of state support enables us to provide universal service in a cost effective and efficient manner from a central location.

With the mandate to convert from analog to digital, the State of Nebraska invested \$46 million dollars in NET's conversion. The federal government's share of NET's conversion cost was less than \$5 million.

Most states are seeing declines in tax revenues that translate into significant reductions in state support of public broadcasting. In FY 09, there were rescissions of over \$29 million. A survey of states for FY 10 projects an additional net loss of \$10 million. We are estimating additional reductions in the \$20 to \$30 million range in FY 2011. These estimates include all states that appropriate money to public broadcasting, not just the networks.

State networks all provide services that you find in most single station operations. In addition many provide statewide education service for the classroom as well as professional development for teachers.

Several provide emergency information on a statewide basis and many provide the only statewide access to news and information about state government. This ranges from legislative coverage to news and documentaries on topics of state interest.

For example, in Nebraska we partnered with the executive, legislative and judicial branches of state government and implemented a communications technology redesign that dramatically increased the public's access to their state government.

By bringing multimedia technology and broadband capabilities into the State Capitol, Nebraska citizens now have simultaneous access to nine internet streams from the Legislature floor, every Legislative hearing room, the Supreme and Appellate Court rooms, and the Governor's press room. The cameras are remotely controlled from our facilities.

This service can be delivered live on any of NET's four digital television channels or its radio network. NET is archiving audio of the legislative proceedings and audio plus video sessions of all Court proceedings. It is part of a strategic priority to create a public media archive. The coverage is offered to the state's commercial radio and television stations as well.

It would be impossible to sustain the quality of programs and services without pooling our resources with other public broadcasters across the country for a core schedule provided by PBS and NPR. Additionally, NET partners with local and state entities to leverage its TV, radio and online presence. For example, NET developed a multipart service using TV, radio and online resources exploring solutions to the underage drinking problem. This multi-media service benefited from NET's partnerships with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, the Nebraska Center for Alcohol and Drug Abuse, and other partners.

Public broadcasting has been chronically underfunded since the act was passed in 1967. The national system was predicated on the idea that the federal government would provide seed money in the form of a base grant and additional funding based on the amount of Non Federal Financial Support that licensees could raise locally.

Today, over half of NET's funding comes from the State of Nebraska. Less than 12 percent comes from Congress. About 22 percent comes from private sources including donations, grants, contracts and corporate support. The University of Nebraska provides about 7.5 percent of direct funding.

If we are going to build a broadband network for the American public, we need to ensure there is an adequate level of funding to not only support access but also to acquire or produce educational, cultural and public media programs and services.

The media landscape has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. Public television stations are in many cases the last locally owned and operated television stations. We are local in structure and mission, and are committed to providing local and locally relevant programming. We are using our digital capabilities to offer innovative educational and public safety services, and provide extensive outreach efforts in close cooperation with other community groups.

For example, NET partnered with the Native American Public Telecommunications organization, the Nebraska Department of Education, the Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center, the Alliance Public Library, the Northern Ponca Tribe and numerous other partners on over 20 screenings of the *American Experience* film *We Shall Remain*. We also developed a website with supplemental resources. All of this was integrated into the Omaha Indian Nation's public school curriculum.

For the seventh consecutive year, the Roper Public Affairs and Media survey found public television to be the nation's most trusted institution among nationally known organizations and one of the best values for tax dollars. Public broadcasting is the most trusted source of news and information for the American public.

I would be remiss if I didn't state the obvious. The foundation of public television is education. It was a fundamental principle of the Communications Act to have education as central to public media, and this includes providing trusted news and information sources.

During the 2008-2009 school years, NET's Nebraska Studies website containing information specific to Nebraska was visited by nearly 540,000 unique visitors. More than 103,000 lesson plans were downloaded from the site. And, multimedia learning subjects on the site were viewed more than 16 million times. This website, developed with the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Historical Society has become the de facto textbook for fourth grade students throughout the state.

Nebraska is very excited and supportive of the progress PBS has made with the Digital Learning Library. It is totally compatible with our strategic priority to expand the public media archive to include content that can be downloaded into any classroom in the State. We can address the educational needs of this country by improving education and lowering the cost.

Several years ago, I recall that the FCC became so concerned about the lack of children's programming on commercial television, that they established a minimum requirement of three hours a week. Public television does that every day before noon. Our programs are not re-runs or old sitcoms. We are the only source of programming truly aimed at getting our children ready for school.

This is one of the most exciting times in our industry's history. We are redefining public media. Whether it's over-the-air, online or with partners in our community, we have the opportunity to provide Americans with access to content and resources on demand, when they want it, where they want it and on whatever device they choose.

Thank you and I'll be happy to answer any questions.