



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

***Public Safety Communications:
Are the Needs of Our First Responders Being Met?***

March 30, 2011 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Public Safety Communications: Are the Needs of Our First Responders Being Met?” :

“Thank you, Chairman King, for holding today’s hearing on emergency communications for first responders.

In the 110th and the 111th Congresses, this committee held four oversight hearings on emergency communications. We established a strong record on the importance of emergency communications and interoperability in assuring the security of the nation in times of natural disaster, terrorist attack and catastrophic events.

Because of the need for first responders to be well-equipped and able to communicate effectively, I am pleased to be an original cosponsor of the “Broadband for First Responders Act of 2011,” as introduced by Chairman King.

This bill will strengthen the Nation’s emergency communications system by reallocating the D-Block of 700 mega-hertz (MHz) wireless broadband spectrum for public safety use and fund the creation of a national network.

On the same day this bill was introduced, President Obama announced his support for reallocation of the D Block to public safety. Since its inception, this Committee has enjoyed bi-partisan support of efforts to improve emergency communications.

I had hoped that assuring state-of-the-art communications for our first responders would be an area of bi-partisan agreement throughout Congress.

Unfortunately, even on this issue, bipartisan support is not to be had. I am told that Chairman King’s bill, which was referred solely to the Energy and Commerce Committee, has met with opposition from the Republican leadership of that Committee.

Instead, of moving forward with legislation to reallocate D Block for First Responders, the Chairman of Energy and Commerce has indicated his preference for selling the publicly-held spectrum to private interests and using proceeds of the sale to reduce the deficit.

While deficit reduction is a worthy goal, we cannot afford to be penny-wise and pound-foolish.

Not only will reallocation of D Block create savings by streamlining communications and creating a nationwide interoperable network, but because it will increase the effectiveness of disaster response, countless lives will be saved.

The 9/11 Commission realized that emergency communication is critical for ensuring public safety and effective response to disasters. The Commission specifically recommended Congress support

legislation providing for the expedited and increased assignment of radio spectrum for public safety purposes.

The necessity of emergency communications effectiveness was also recognized by the House of Representative's Select Bi-partisan Committee on Hurricane Katrina. This Select Committee, formed by Speaker Hastert and chaired by Rep Tom Davis, both Republicans, found that due to storm impact and flooding, more than 2,000 emergency personnel were forced to communicate in single channel mode, radio to radio, utilizing only three mutual aid frequencies.

To date, the FCC has not moved forward with efforts to auction the D-Block. However, the FCC retains the right to conduct this auction.

I hope that today's hearing will convince the FCC and the Chairman of Energy and Commerce of the importance of public safety communications and the need to reallocate—not auction—D Block.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Dena Graziano or Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
H2-117, Ford House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515
Phone: (202) 226-2616 | Fax: (202) 226-4499
<http://chsdemocrats.house.gov>