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October 9, 2008

Via Electronic Delivery

Ms. Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary Federal Communications Commission 445 12th Street, SW, TW-A325 Washington, DC 20554

Re: Notice of *Ex Parte*

Applications of ALLTEL Corporation and Verizon Wireless

WT Docket No. 08-95

Dear Ms. Dortch:

The Rural Telecommunications Group, Inc. ("RTG"), by its attorneys, hereby submits this ex parte letter in response to the *Response to Information Request*¹ submitted by Verizon Wireless and ALLTEL Corporation ("the Applicants") in the above-captioned proceeding. In its *General Information Request*, the Federal Communications Commission's ("FCC" or "Commission") Wireless Telecommunications Bureau asked the Applicants to furnish "additional information and clarification of certain matters discussed in the applications." RTG applauds the Commission for asking expansive questions of the Applicants in order to "make the necessary public interest findings." However, many of the answers furnished by the Applicants in their *Response to Information Request* are intentionally vague, noncommittal or heavily qualified, and furthermore, have little to no bearing on the anticompetitive effects that will result if the proposed merger is allowed to occur.

In short, the Applicants have merely cloaked themselves in a set of the emperor's new clothes. It is incredulous that the Applicants have failed to adequately explain their position on some of the most salient issues at stake in this proposed merger, namely: (1) the continued uncertainty over the long-term status of Alltel's GSM network, (2) Verizon's unwillingness to enter into and/or extend voice and data roaming agreements, and (3) the complete chilling effect this proposed merger would have on new wireless broadband deployment in rural America. The public deserves better. Consumers in rural America deserve better.

¹ In the Matter of Applications of Cellco Partnership d/b/a Verizon Wireless and Atlantis Holdings LLC for Consent to Transfer Control, WT Docket No. 08-95, Response to Information Request (dated September 17, 2008).

² In the Matter of Applications of Cellco Partnership d/b/a Verizon Wireless and Atlantis Holdings LLC for Consent to Transfer Control, WT Docket No. 08-95, General Information Request (dated September 11, 2008).

³ *Id*.

I. <u>Verizon has made no commitment to upgrade ALLTEL's GSM Network.</u>

Of particular concern to RTG is Verizon's response to Question II.5. Here, the Commission asked the Applicants about the future status of ALLTEL's GSM network and also about the status of GSM roaming agreements entered into by ALLTEL.⁴ The Commission asked Verizon, in no uncertain terms, whether it has plans "to maintain, upgrade and expand the GSM network." Verizon's response does nothing to assuage the anticompetitive concerns raised by RTG in its Petition to Deny.

First, Verizon stated that it has zero plans to expand the geographical scope of the ALLTEL GSM network. So while Verizon is quick to proclaim that it "views ALLTEL's GSM roaming network as a successful business," it is completely unwilling to extend that successful business into new markets, including those markets completely without any existing GSM coverage, and somewhat surprisingly, even those markets where Verizon and/or ALLTEL already have existing CDMA facilities and operations.

Second, Verizon uses what can only be described as exacting language when it states that should the merger proceed, it will "maintain the [GSM] network to at least its current level of quality, including any necessary upgrades and investments." Verizon deliberately omits any mention whatsoever of a technology migration to UMTS, which is the globally accepted 3G standard for the GSM family of technologies. A decision not to migrate to UMTS would strike a severe blow to the national roaming prospects of AT&T Mobility, Inc. (AT&T), T-Mobile USA, Inc. (T-Mobile) and every other GSM operator in the United States as they face a "dead end" in terms of service and coverage area in the hundreds of thousands of square miles of the country where Alltel has a roam-only GSM network.

Third, when asked by the Commission to provide a list of markets (by CMAs) in which, post-transaction, the combined firm would hold the sole GSM license, Verizon stated that "there will be at least one other GSM carrier licensed in every retained CMA in which ALLTEL currently provides GSM service." By their very nature, FCC licenses are technology agnostic. Furthermore, it is common knowledge that T-Mobile and AT&T, both long-time operators of GSM/UMTS networks, hold licenses throughout the country, including those ALLTEL GSM markets in the lower 48 states. However, this undisputed fact does nothing to actually put wireless broadband networks in rural markets immediately upon the closing of the proposed transaction. There are hundreds of counties across the country where, should the ALLTEL GSM network get shut down or be designated to perpetual "2G" status, there is no GSM alternative for millions of roaming subscribers, some of them living in adjacent rural counties. RTG believes that the more appropriate question Verizon should have been asked was in which counties in which ALLTEL provides GSM roaming services is there a second, operational, GSM network. The answer to this question would clearly show vast areas of the country where ALLTEL's GSM

⁴ "At page 5 and 15 of Exhibit 1 of the Application, the Applicants discuss ALLTEL's GSM network. (a) Describe in detail Verizon Wireless's plans for ALLTEL's GSM network. Does Verizon Wireless plan to shut down ALLTEL's GSM network and if so what is the timeline for such shutdown? Or does Verizon Wireless plan to operate ALLTEL's GSM network indefinitely? Does Verizon Wireless have plans to maintain, upgrade and expand the GSM network? (b) Provide a list of markets (by CMAs) in which, post-transaction, the combined firm will hold the sole GSM license. (c) Does Verizon Wireless plan to renew or extend GSM roaming contracts when their terms expire?"

network plays a crucial role in fulfilling the overall nationwide GSM footprint used by millions of American mobile customers.

When taken together, these vague and misleading statements tell a cautionary tale. Verizon is unwilling to make any concrete commitments to support GSM through UMTS in ALLTEL markets, and thus will only do the bare minimum to maintain "status quo" voice (2G) and small-throughput data (2.5G) roaming for a limited number of *existing* mobile operators, and do so only for so long as is absolutely necessary. This is simply unacceptable and would have a devastating impact on wireless competition in the United States.

II. The Commission must request and examine existing roaming agreements between Verizon and Tier II, Tier III and Tier IV carriers to determine the deleterious and anticompetitive effects the merger would have on smaller carriers and their customers.

A merger between Verizon and ALLTEL would have a game-shifting impact on wholesale roaming relationships, and by extension, the commercial success or lack thereof of most, if not all, retail mobile operators in the United States. As the Applicants have stated numerous times throughout the administrative process, the domestic mobile marketplace is turning "national in scope," and those mobile operators advertising a larger footprint than their competitors have a distinct advantage at the point of sale. Even more, any mobile operator who offers both a large retail footprint *and* a native footprint upon which all other mobile operators in the country are dependent for roaming coverage holds an unparalleled, perhaps insurmountable position in the marketplace. By inheriting ALLTEL's dual-mode network, Verizon stands to dictate the commercial climate of mobile services in these largely rural markets for both the near-term and mid-term. This impact extends well beyond the operational future of ALLTEL's "roam-only" GSM network, because going forward, any mobile operator in the United States that desires truly "nationwide" coverage, whether CDMA or GSM, must now roam with Verizon in order to offer that highly coveted nationwide coverage.

The simplest and most expeditious way to gauge whether the various wholesale roaming agreements entered into by Verizon and ALLTEL over the years lend themselves to a lessening of competition in the wireless marketplace is for the Commission to review and compare those very same agreements. Therefore, RTG finds it highly surprising that after numerous mobile operators and industry groups (including RTG) have filed comments and petitions voicing their concerns about the specific topic of roaming post-merger, the Commission has declined to review any inter-operator wholesale roaming agreements, and instead is relying completely upon Verizon's vague, and highly-conditioned, public statements. Verizon has made absolutely zero commitment to upgrade ALLTEL's GSM network to UMTS, and furthermore, it has reserved the right to honor existing roaming agreements after their respective terms end *only* if it feels it is in its business interest to do so. Even Verizon's more recent offer to extend some agreements up to two calendar years adds little value when compared to existing roaming agreements between mobile operators, many of which are for five to fifteen years.⁵

⁵ See, e.g., http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=191722&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1203113&highlight and http://investor.metropcs.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=177745&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1203113&highlight (announcing Leap Wireless International, Inc. and MetroPCS Communications, Inc. agreement to enter into a roaming agreement of at least 10 years duration).

RTG would like to remind the Commission of the disastrous impact the proposed merger will have on the competitive landscape of the domestic mobile industry, were Verizon allowed to proceed with plans to either neglect future upgrades from GSM to UMTS on the network it acquires, or were it to fail to extend or expand roaming agreements. As the public's demand for wireless broadband intensifies, this quality of service "chasm" in ALLTEL GSM markets will become more and more apparent, and it will ultimately drive wireless consumers living *outside* of the ALLTEL GSM markets to choose Verizon's own retail CDMA and 1xRTT EvDO Rev. A. service. Since the mobile marketplace is national in scope, and all other variables (such as pricepoint and device used) being equal, the rational customer will be more willing to choose the Verizon retail option that requires little to no roaming and service on a truly high-speed 3G data network versus retail service on any other mobile competitor that does require roaming on an inferior (non-3G) data network.

III. Verizon has made no commitment to enter into roaming agreements with new market entrants, and by continuing to operate without entering into such agreements, Verizon will place new wireless broadband operators at a competitive disadvantage.

Three drivers are now in motion because of this merger that, when taken together, will cause a chilling effect on new mobile broadband deployment in rural America. First, as has been greatly detailed in RTG's previous filings, Verizon stands to inherit, post-merger, an excessive amount of CMRS spectrum in many of the overlap markets. Second, as has been discussed in detail above, Verizon likely will abandon any type of data deployment and roaming access on the ALLTEL GSM network. Third, nowhere in any of Verizon's filings has it ever committed itself to entering into any new roaming agreements of any type. RTG believes that this lack of commitment is a deliberate omission on the part of Verizon so that it may hasten the demise of the ALLTEL GSM network, and at the same time, increase market pressures that would influence wireless consumers to move from GSM operators to CDMA operators, of which Verizon is known to be the largest, and by default, eliminate potential competition.

Numerous "first time" licensees, including RTG members, have purchased spectrum in the Commission's most recent AWS and 700 MHz auctions, and furthermore, most of these licensees intend to deploy UMTS networks in rural markets. Somewhat ironically, these exact same licensees now stand a greater chance of re-evaluating their build-out options utilizing UMTS and will end up not providing facilities-based mobile service, and thus consumer choice, to rural subscribers. Because LTE has yet to be standardized, the options a new market entrant faces today are reduced dramatically. New market entrants are forced to either deploy UMTS with no promise of nationwide data roaming outside of their immediate market, deploy CDMA and be at the mercy of Verizon as to whether or not they can even obtain a roaming agreement, or completely abandon any efforts to build-out a network, and perhaps in the end, sell their spectrum and remove themselves as a potential market competitor. This is yet another example of the "law of unintended consequences" that frequently occurs when the Commission rushes though the decision making process, and it is occurring at a time when the country needs increased marketplace competition, more job growth, and deployment of broadband in rural markets. Allowing this merger to proceed unfettered will delay or prevent the achievement of these ends, to the detriment of the American wireless consumer, especially those living in rural America.

IV. Data roaming must be included in the FCC's definition of "automatic roaming".

There is a consensus among telecommunications experts that the "future" of the telecommunications industry is mobile wireless, and within that particular sub-industry, mobile data is becoming the driving force of industry growth. Global mobile data traffic is expected to grow 1000% between 2007 and 2012 according to Informa Telecoms & Media, the leading provider of business intelligence to the global telecommunications and media markets. Informa also projects that mobile video traffic alone will grow more than thirty-fold by 2012.⁶ The United States will not remain immune from the migration from voice-centric to data-centric usage. CTIA- The Wireless Association recently announced that wireless data revenues rose 40% from 2006 to 2007 and revenue from data now constitutes approximately 20% of all mobile generated revenue, a percentage that will increase and soon surpass voice traffic (and revenue) itself. By its very nature, voice traffic is capped by the amount of time in a given day multiplied by the number of unique mobile users with a mobile device. Mobile data traffic has no such limitations and its growth, in terms of volume, is limited only by human imagination and the technological limitations at any given time. The future of telecommunications is mobile data and all domestic mobile operators (including those operating in rural America) must have the ability for their customers to access this mobile data throughout the country. Data roaming agreements are necessary for American citizens (including those living in and traveling to rural America) to remain connected and involved in a progressing society.

Individual RTG members have been told by both Verizon and AT&T that neither company is willing to support data roaming at 3G and beyond. Furthermore, both of these same operators have stated similar, restrictive sentiments throughout their public filings within the Roaming Docket. It is incumbent upon the Commission to include data roaming in its definition of automatic roaming so that the migration from voice to data is not used as a loophole by Verizon (or AT&T) to cut off other mobile operators at the knees and limit future competition. Failure by this Commission to incorporate data roaming into automatic roaming will sound the death knell for all U.S. mobile operators who do not have their own nationwide footprint. RTG implores the Commission to favorably resolve the data roaming issue by including data roaming as part of the definition of automatic roaming before it acts on the Alltel/Verizon merger, thereby ensuring that a competitive mobile data environment will exist in the future.

In sum, by neglecting to include UMTS in any of its future development plans, Verizon is essentially stonewalling access to true mobile broadband for not just dozens of operators, but more importantly, millions of their paying customers. Furthermore, the Applicants' complete unwillingness to offer data roaming to not merely new mobile operators, but even to existing mobile operators already engaged in roaming agreements with either Verizon or ALLTEL, is

⁶ See http://www.computerweekly.com/Articles/2008/07/21/231561/mobile-e-mail-and-connectivity-driving-data-traffic-boom.htm, quoting Informa Telecoms & Media, "Mobile Networks Forecasts: Future Mobile Traffic, Base Stations & Revenues," June, 2008.

⁷ *See http://www.ctia.org/media/press/body.cfm/prid/1772* quoting the CTIA Semi-Annual Wireless Industry Survey, released September 10, 2008.

⁸ See generally In the Matter of Reexamination of Roaming Obligations of Commercial Mobile Radio Service Providers, WT Docket No. 05-265, Comments of Verizon Wireless (filed October 29, 2007) and Comments of AT&T Inc. (filed October 29, 2007).

highly worrisome. Verizon's answers to the Commissions' questions, especially those pertaining to the future of the GSM network, roaming agreements and data roaming, are at best insufficient, and worst, call into question the motivation for the Applicants' expressed strong desire to close this transaction as soon as possible and with as few conditions as possible. RTG again respectfully requests that the Commission designate the applications for hearing under section 309(e) of the Communications Act so that the proper scrutiny will be afforded the proposed merger and that all interested parties may submit evidence addressing the material questions of fact raised in this proceeding.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Respectfully submitted,

Rural Telecommunications Group, Inc.

By: <u>/s/ Caressa D. Bennet</u> Caressa D. Bennet General Counsel

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Colleen von Hollen, of Bennet & Bennet, PLLC, 4350 East West Highway, Suite 201, Bethesda, MD 20814, hereby certify that a copy of the foregoing "Notice of *Ex Parte*" of the Rural Telecommunications Group, Inc. was served on October 10, 2008, by first-class United States mail, postage prepaid, unless indicated otherwise, on those listed below:

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