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Ten WV Counties and One Virginia County Express Support for Changes to the National Radio Quiet Zone Restrictions Affecting Public Safety Communications

Pendleton County, WV, October 26, 2024 — The County Commissions of ten counties in West Virginia, alongside counterparts in Virginia, have formally expressed their need for change regarding the National Radio Quiet Zone (NRQZ) through Resolutions and Letters of Support. These documents underscore the detrimental effects of NRQZ regulations on critical public safety communications, which significantly hinder the operational effectiveness of first responders in the region.

We contend that the federal NRQZ regulations, established in the late 1950s, are misaligned with modern-day communication tools utilized by first responders nationwide. Our region, which includes significant public lands—such as National Forests, State Forests, and State Parks—bears the responsibility of safeguarding a substantial number of visitors and residents.

First responder agencies across Pendleton County and neighboring counties, as well as mutual aid partners, are increasingly challenged in maintaining clear and reliable radio communications—an essential component for effective emergency response and public safety.

To date, the following West Virginia County Commissions have passed Resolutions stating their concerns regarding the adverse impacts of the NRQZ on regional emergency services: Barbour, Grant, Hardy, Pendleton, Pocahontas, Randolph, Tucker, Upshur, and Webster. The Hampshire County Commission has issued a Letter of Support for Pendleton County's initiatives. Additionally, the Seneca Rocks Development Authority, which represents economic development interests in Grant and Pendleton Counties, has issued a Resolution, emphasizing the regional significance of this issue. The Augusta County Board of Supervisors in Virginia has issued a Resolution calling for amendments to the NRQZ to enhance public safety communications.

The Resolutions and Letters articulate concerns on behalf of approximately 262,296 residents and 100,000's of additional tourists and visitors of West Virginia and Virginia who merit enhanced public safety communication systems. According to U.S. Census data, 136,350 of these individuals reside within the ten West Virginia counties, while approximately 78,000 live in Augusta County. Additionally, the independent cities of Staunton (25,750) and Waynesboro (22,196) are not included in Augusta County's figures, bringing the total to 125,946 residents in Virginia. Moreover, tens of thousands of additional individuals in other NRQZ-affected counties in West Virginia and Virginia, who have yet to formalize their concerns, continue to feel the impact of these communication challenges. Additionally, Pendleton and Pocahontas County economies rely on tourism dollars and combined they alone host over one-million visitors annually. These people deserve the same level of public safety support they receive back home.

Pendleton County Emergency Services Coordinator Rick Gillespie has spearheaded these collaborative efforts and stated, “While we respect the missions of the Green Bank Observatory (Pocahontas County) and the Sugar Grove Research Station (Pendleton County), we urge the National Science Foundation, the Green Bank Observatory, National Security Agency, the Federal Communications Commission and Senators Capito and Manchin, Congressman Mooney and Congresswoman Miller to acknowledge and support the vital functions of our emergency management and first responder agencies, including Fire, EMS, and Law Enforcement.”

We do not seek the closure of these federal entities but rather their commitment to identifying and funding viable solutions that would enable our communication systems to operate effectively, similar to those in the majority of America.”

Gillespie elaborated, “Although the missions of the Green Bank Observatory and the Sugar Grove Research Station are distinct—astronomy and national defense, respectively—there are tangible instances where citizens and first responders have faced dangers due to inadequate communications, largely stemming from NRQZ restrictions. The NRQZ stands as one of the few radio quiet zones globally and the protected agencies appear to have successful operations outside of the quiet zone, in non-protected areas, leading us to question the continued need here.

The NRQZ imposes severe limitations on essential communication systems, including two-way radio networks, cellular and wireless data systems, and satellite broadband services like Starlink. These constraints jeopardize public safety by potentially delaying emergency response, thereby endangering lives. October 25, 2024, it was released by the NRQZ and Starlink that they have entered into the expected *voluntary* agreement which will allow 99.5% of residents located within the NRQZ to utilize Starlink, while 0.5% will not. What they did not release was the fact that customers with the RV/Roam packages had been using Starlink for approximately two years throughout 100% of the NRQZ. Now, the 0.5% have lost coverage after having it for two years. This means that a large section of southeastern Pendleton County and an even larger section of northern Pocahontas will *NOT* be able to utilize Starlink. Those areas *ARE* the 0.5% exclusion zone. In many cases, Starlink was the only Internet provider option residents and emergency responders had. This is unacceptable.

In the absence of dissolving the NRQZ, we advocate for federal agencies to support the necessary technological advancements and financial resources to mitigate unwanted signals at NRQZ equipment locations, rather than imposing the prohibitive costs of power reductions on local public safety providers. Or, allow us to utilize the public safety radio bands without restrictions as-is the case across the United States.

Gillespie emphasized, “The NRQZ representatives have not engaged with us since early in the year. While we recognize that the NRQZ-commissioned study is approaching the conclusion of its first phase, we cannot allow communication issues to persist any longer. We urge them to establish a firm deadline for resolving this matter; if not, we will explore alternative actions. This issue can no longer be ignored or postponed, as it directly jeopardizes public safety.”

Gillespie stated, “Despite our requests for increasing power limitations to reasonable performance standards, we have instead received requests from the NRQZ to further *DECREASE* our power limits. For instance, as just one example, a proposed new agreement would decrease the power limit at one tower site from 0.3 watts to approximately 0.16 watts, as opposed to an ordinary limit of 100-watts, severely undermining our interoperability and communication capabilities. An ordinary hand-held portable radio ordinarily emits 5-watts. Other regional sites face similar restrictions. When we have sought NRQZ staff to review existing sites, the response

has typically involved further reduced limits not relief, inhibiting our ability to communicate effectively.”

Gillespie further noted, “While some power waivers for the VHF Band have been granted, the existing statewide interoperable radio network was designed to operate on the UHF Band due to frequency licensing issues at the planning stage. We require federal support to secure workable frequencies and to fund our transition should a move to VHF be desired. The currently operational UHF equipment in Pendleton and across West Virginia will not function on the VHF Band; such a transition necessitates new infrastructure and user devices.”

Regarding the cellular service vital for first responders and the public, Gillespie stated, “Our region could greatly benefit from enhanced cell phone and wireless device coverage if the NRQZ did not impose restrictions on cellular towers. We have documented evidence that cellular companies intended to establish new sites in our area but were deterred by the extensive restrictions. Moreover, existing cell sites are subject to the same mandated signal nulls as our 911 towers, leading to reduced coverage areas.”

Many first responder agencies rely on cellular signals to fulfill their missions. For instance, ambulance crews can transmit EKGs to medical command doctors, receiving vital instructions enroute to hospitals. Law enforcement officers depend on in-car mobile data terminals for critical functions, which significantly enhance officer and public safety. Without adequate cellular service, these systems fail to operate.

Gillespie reiterated, “Throughout this process, any adjustments to the NRQZ regulations have been made without our involvement. These restrictions continue to escalate without our input, which must cease.”

We implore the relevant federal agencies to engage in constructive dialogue and provide the necessary support to alleviate the impacts of NRQZ regulations on our emergency services and public safety communications.

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For more information, please contact:

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