BEFORE THE IDAHO PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

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| IN THE MATTER OF THE INVESTIGATION OF U S WEST COMMUNICATIONS, INC.’S SERVICE IN THE NORTH SHOSHONE, IDAHO AREA. | )  )  )  )  ) | CASE NO. USW-S-95-7  ORDER NO.  26231 |

On September 18, 1995, the Commission received a Petition with approximately 85 signatures of people residing in and around the north Shoshone, Idaho area.  The petitioners requested that the Commission examine whether U S WEST Communications, Inc. (U S WEST) is providing adequate backup telephone service when the area experiences power outages.  Petitioners contended the telephones are inoperable for a period of time following a power outage in the area.   U S WEST now having taken corrective action to improve the facilities in the area, the Commission by this Order dismisses this case as a formal proceeding.

BACKGROUND

On May 12, 1995, the Commission’s Consumer Assistance Section received an informal complaint from Marlynn Brookbank, a resident of the north Shoshone area, regarding telephone service.  According to Mr. Brookbank, the telephones go dead whenever there is a power outage in the area.  Mr. Brookbank and others contacted U S WEST about the problem, but it apparently was not resolved.

On Staff’s inquiry,  U S WEST on May 17 advised Staff that the area is served by a pair gain device (SLC-96, referred to as a Slick 96).  A pair gain device is a multiplexer that allows a few lines to be run to a terminal where the device is located, and then provides a much larger number of lines to run from the terminal to individual telephone customers. The device requires electrical power to operate, provided in this case by Idaho Power Company.  Batteries in the terminal supply backup power in the event of a power failure.

According to Staff, U S WEST suggested the batteries may have failed, and promised to test the batteries and replace them if they proved unsatisfactory.  On July 20, Mr. Brookbank contacted the Commission Staff to advise that there had been another power outage and telephone service again was lost.  Staff contacted U S WEST on July 21 and was advised that the batteries had been replaced.  According to the Company, the batteries only provide power for four hours.  If an outage lasts longer than four hours the batteries lose their charge and telephone service is lost.

On September 18, the Commission received the petition from the north Shoshone area residents.  The petition states that for more than a year, north Shoshone has had no telephone service during power outages.  In comments subsequently filed with the Commission, Mr. Brookbank stated that the problem has existed for approximately three years.  The petitioners also stated that inquiries to U S WEST had not produced acceptable results.  In particular, the petitioners pointed out the need for an adequate backup battery system for the pair gain device.

On October 4, 1995, the Commission issued a Notice of Investigation and Order No. 26187 directing U S WEST to respond to specific questions regarding telephone service in the north Shoshone area during power outages.  The Company filed its responses on October 18, 1995.  According to U S WEST, the problems apparently derived from two different pair gain devices serving the area.  It was not at first clear to the Company which unit was serving the affected customers.  Initially, U S WEST found a problem in the pair gain device furthest north in the exchange.  The Company stated that it replaced defective batteries in this unit, added an additional battery string, and installed a larger circuit breaker.

It was not until another power failure in the area that the Company realized that a second unit was also having problems.  Apparently, the second unit had tested satisfactorily using standard test gear.  When the unit again failed, U S WEST retested it with other test gear and found that the battery string in the second device was in fact failing.  The Company installed a new battery string and also placed a backup string in the unit.  To help prevent lightning from tripping the system circuit breakers, U S WEST stated it replaced the standard 20 amp circuit breakers with 30 amp circuit breakers.  The Company also transferred the power alarm reporting to its center in Denver, which has upgraded its alarms to better identify the nature of the alarms and thus provide better responsiveness to potential problems.

On October 10, the Company met with Mr. Brookbank and a reporter from the Lincoln County Journal while the Company tested the new battery packs.  The Company tested the unit by cutting commercial power to it.  The system transferred to the backup power supply and functioned as required.  Mr. Brookbank subsequently wrote to the Commission, stating confidence that “the equipment repairs and the top priority U S WEST placed on this project due to the IPUC intervention has resulted in an operable system.”

In a memorandum to the Commission dated October 25, 1995, the Staff stated that U S WEST has taken appropriate action to solve the problem and recommended that the complaint be considered resolved and the case be closed.  Mr. Brookbank also filed additional comments, questioning some aspects of the improvements as represented by U S WEST or Staff.  For example, Mr. Brookbank questioned the dates of some battery replacements and the capacity of one pair gain device terminal to hold eight batteries rather than four.  However, Mr. Brookbank again expressed confidence that the problem has been resolved, stating that “the bottom line is that the backup system will be operable for us here in north Shoshone during power outages.”

FINDINGS OF FACT AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

Idaho Code § 61-302 requires U S WEST to provide telephone service and facilities that are adequate, efficient, just and reasonable.  It seems self-evident, if the problems existed in the north Shoshone area as long as and to the degree represented by petitioners, that U S WEST was not providing adequate service and facilities.  It is regrettable that the problems were not satisfactorily resolved until a formal complaint was filed with the Commission, despite previous requests by customers and the Commission Staff to the Company to investigate and cure the problem.  Nonetheless we find, based on the representations by petitioners, the Staff and U S WEST, that the problems with telephone service during power outages in the north Shoshone area have been resolved.  We conclude therefore that this case can be dismissed.  We also note, however, that the improvements made by the Company may not be fully tested until another power outage.  In the event telephone service is lost during future outages, we anticipate residents in the area will notify the Commission.

O R D E R

Based on the foregoing, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that this case is dismissed.

THIS IS A FINAL ORDER.  Any person interested in this Order (or in issues finally decided by this Order) or in interlocutory Orders previously issued in this Case No. USW-S-95-7 may petition for reconsideration within twenty-one (21) days of the service date of this Order with regard to any matter decided in this Order or in interlocutory Orders previously issued in this Case No. USW-S-95-7.  Within seven (7) days after any person has petitioned for reconsideration, any other person may cross-petition for reconsideration.  See Idaho Code § 61-626.

DONE by Order of the Idaho Public Utilities Commission at Boise, Idaho this                  day of  November 1995.

RALPH NELSON, PRESIDENT

MARSHA H. SMITH, COMMISSIONER

DENNIS S. HANSEN, COMMISSIONER

ATTEST:

Myrna J. Walters

Commission Secretary

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