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How Wireless Policy Affects Minorities
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Spectrum fuels the wireless industry and the prospect of not being able to obtain enough of this finite resource should worry us. As a nation, we are at a critical crossroads-where choosing the wrong path threatens the livelihood of our ever-expanding community of wireless users.

In coming months, our policymakers' course of action is likely to affect the U.S. digital future. These airwaves are worth billions to wireless companies and are vital to the success and sustainability of the wireless industry and all consumer technologies it offers. Think of spectrum as the lifeblood of wireless technology.

Given the explosion in wireless consumer demand for smartphones and other devices that depend on spectrum, wireless providers need more spectrum if consumers want to continue to stream videos, pay bills and get access to a range of services on their wireless devices.

Cisco estimates that 50 billion devices will be connected to the nation's wireless network by 2020, as smartphones gain in popularity, and more and more everyday items are mobilized for consumer ease and efficiency.

The 2010 census showed that minority populations, Latinos in particular, are growing rapidly. Pair this with the fact that a high percentage of minorities depend on wireless service for Internet access, and the picture is clear: Consumer demand for wireless services will only grow.

Latinos and African-Americans lead the way in mobile broadband use-subscribing at a rate of 53 percent and 58 percent, respectively, and both groups will be disproportionately affected if providers fail to

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keep up with the demand for more spectrum.

This need is not some myth created by the wireless industry to justify amassing valuable spectrum, and its ramifications go well beyond the Beltway. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has persuasively laid out the spectrum crunch facing the nation. Numerous companies, network engineers, wireless experts, analysts and even the White House have all testified about the threats associated with the looming problem-consistently presenting solid information supporting the detrimental effects of not having enough spectrum.

Only an extremely small faction of naysayers questions the realities of the crunch.

The FCC, Congress and industry stakeholders have been trying to reach consensus solutions so that this crucial resource is more effectively and efficiently utilized by spectrum holders. As FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski said last month, "We can't afford to wait to allocate more spectrum."

The wireless industry is also looking into market-based solutions. AT&T's recently announced merger with T-Mobile is one example. The near future means a fully connected world, and to get there, both long and short-term solutions need to be considered.

AT&T told the FCC that, if the merger is approved, the company will deploy next-generation 4G Long Term Evolution wireless networks-lightning-fast mobile Internet speeds comparable to wired broadband in the home-to more than 97 percent of Americans. AT&T said it can provide higher-quality and faster service while also closing coverage gaps. Given that minority communities rely on wireless services as their primary means for Internet access, the merger should offer these communities greater accessibility to reliable services.

AT&T also predicts that the merger can create opportunities and benefits for minorities across important sectors, including health care, education and the growth of small and minority-owned businesses-where Latinos are leading the way.

When considering market-based solutions like the merger, or other alternatives for securing adequate spectrum availability, policymakers need to consider the effects carefully. But they shouldn't miss an opportunity to provide solutions that could help ensure more minorities have access to better service.

All communities can gain from a healthy wireless industry that will offer widespread options to the best technologies, create jobs through infrastructure upgrades, increase construction and deployment projects and foster online business opportunities-while allowing everyone to participate in a digitally connected society.