

Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554

In the Matter of)
National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc.) WC Docket No. 05-337
2025 Modification of Average Schedule Universal)
Service Support Formula) WC Docket No. 10-90
High-Cost Universal Service Support)

ORDER

Adopted: December 11, 2024

Released: December 11, 2024

By the Deputy Division Chief, Telecommunications Access Policy Division, Wireline Competition Bureau:

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Pursuant to section 69.606(b) of the Commission’s rules, the National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc. (NECA) has submitted the annual average schedule company high-cost loop support (HCLS) formula modifications for Commission review.1 The Commission’s rules require that this formula “simulate the disbursements that would be received . . . by a company that is representative of average schedule companies.”2 For the reasons discussed below, we approve NECA’s proposed HCLS formula for 2025.

II. BACKGROUND

2. Pursuant to Part 54 of the Commission’s rules, HCLS, also known as the loop expense adjustment, provides universal service support to carriers with high loop costs based on the extent that an individual company’s cost per loop (CPL) exceeds the national average cost per loop (NACPL).3 Because average schedule companies are not required to perform company-specific cost studies—the basis upon which a carrier’s expense adjustment is calculated—the Commission has permitted expense adjustments for average schedule companies to be calculated pursuant to a formula developed by NECA and approved annually by the Wireline Competition Bureau (Bureau).4 This formula is developed by NECA using data from a sample group of average schedule carriers and similarly situated companies that file cost data (cost

1 47 CFR § 69.606(b); see also Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service, National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc. 2005 Modification of Average Schedule Universal Service Formulas, CC Docket No. 96-45, Order, 19 FCC Rcd 24998, 25002, para. 7 (WCB 2004) (2005 Order) (requiring NECA to file high-cost loop support formula and supporting data no later than September 1 annually).

2 47 CFR § 69.606.

3 See 47 CFR Part 54, Subpart M.

4 See National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc. Proposed Modifications to the 1998-99 Interstate Average Schedule Formulas, ASD 98-96, Order, 15 FCC Rcd 1819, 1819-20, para. 2 (1999). Average schedule companies have been permitted by the Commission to estimate their access settlements and universal service support through the use of average schedules to avoid company-specific cost studies. See, e.g., ALLTEL Corp. v. FCC, 838 F.2d 551, 553 (D.C. Cir. 1988).

companies) in addition to data (access line and exchange information) obtained from the entire population of average schedule carriers. Average schedule companies that participate in the NECA pools are required to report access line count data to NECA each month based on their billing of End User Common Line (EUCL) charges associated with basic local exchange service.⁵ Once approved, the newly derived formula is used to determine support amounts for all average schedule carriers.

3. In December 2014, the Commission adopted a Report and Order that modified the way HCLS expense adjustments are calculated starting July 1, 2015. The targeted change to the former HCLS rule was designed to provide a more equitable distribution of HCLS among carriers by reducing support proportionally among all HCLS recipients to remain within the shrinking HCLS cap, instead of eliminating support altogether for some companies while preserving support for other companies.⁶

4. In March 2016, the Commission adopted the *Rate-of-Return Reform Order*, which among other things, prescribed a new rate of return to be phased in over a six-year period, beginning July 1, 2016, and adopted limits on operating expenses to be recovered through high-cost support.⁷

5. On August 28, 2024, NECA filed proposed modifications to the current HCLS formula for average schedule companies and requested that they take effect on January 1, 2025 and remain in effect through December 31, 2025.⁸ The Bureau issued a public notice seeking comment on NECA's proposed formula.⁹ No comments were received.

III. DISCUSSION

6. Consistent with prior years, NECA proposes calculating 2025 HCLS payments for average schedule companies based on the relationship of CPL data of sample companies to values representing the number of loops per exchange (CPL calculations).¹⁰ To estimate current year costs, NECA applies forecasted growth factors to data collected from sample average schedule carriers one and two years prior to the current year. NECA then applies cost allocation factors—developed from the cost studies of similarly situated cost companies—to the account balances of each sample average schedule company to estimate a CPL for each of the sample companies. Thereafter, NECA uses regression analyses to predict CPLs for all average schedule carriers. Each average schedule company's derived CPL is then used to calculate the HCLS support amount consistent with section 54.1310 of the

⁵ See 2025 NECA Modification of the Average Schedule Universal Service High-Cost Loop Support Formula, WC Docket No. 05-337, at 7 (filed Aug. 28, 2024) (NECA 2025 Filing).

⁶ See *Connect America Fund et al.*, WC Docket No. 10-90 et al., Report and Order, 29 FCC Rcd 15644, 15680-84, paras. 102-14 (2014).

⁷ *Connect America Fund et al.*, WC Docket No. 10-90 et al., Report and Order, Order and Order on Reconsideration and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 31 FCC Rcd 3087 (2016) (*Rate-of-Return Reform Order*).

⁸ See NECA 2025 Filing.

⁹ See *Comment Sought on the 2025 Modification of Average Schedule Company Universal Service High-Cost Loop Support Formula*, WC Docket Nos. 05-337 and 10-90, Public Notice, DA 24-965 (WCB rel. Sep. 19, 2024).

¹⁰ See NECA 2025 Filing at 1-28; see also, e.g., *National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc.; 2024 Modifications of Average Schedule Universal Service Support Formula; High-Cost Universal Service Support*, WC Docket No. 05-337, Order, 38 FCC Rcd 11921, para. 6 (WCB 2023) (*2024 Order*); *National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc.; 2023 Modifications of Average Schedule Universal Service Support Formula; High-Cost Universal Service Support*, WC Docket No. 05-337, Order, DA 22-1273, para. 6 (WCB 2022) (*2023 Order*); *National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc.; 2022 Modifications of Average Schedule Universal Service Support Formula; High-Cost Universal Service Support*, WC Docket No. 05-337, Order, DA 21-1552, para. 6 (WCB 2021) (*2022 Order*); *National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc.; 2021 Modifications of Average Schedule Universal Service Support Formula; High-Cost Universal Service Support*, WC Docket No. 05-337, Order, 35 FCC Rcd 14019, 14021, para. 6 (WCB 2020) (*2021 Order*);

Commission's rules, as revised in 2014.¹¹ The current HCLS formula approved on December 14, 2023 is expected to provide \$4.93 million in payments to 56 average schedule study areas in 2024.¹² NECA's proposed formula for 2025 projects approximately \$6.02 million in payments to carriers serving 59 average schedule study areas, an increase of 22.1% over the payments pursuant to the approved 2023 formula.¹³ While the increase in support is significant relative to 2024 average schedule HCLS, 2025 average schedule HCLS is a small fraction—2.8 percent—of all total HCLS,¹⁴ and will therefore have minimal impact on the overall HCLS cap. We note that such fluctuations may be expected because, when an average schedule company's estimated CPL is close to the support threshold (as is the case with most average schedule companies), small changes in the CPL can have a relatively large effect on the company's HCLS support and whether it receives such support.¹⁵

7. We find that NECA's results and CPL calculations appear to be accurate and complete, and the proposed HCLS formula should reasonably approximate the CPL of the sample average schedule companies, and thereby allocate funds appropriately to average schedule companies.¹⁶ Therefore, we approve the HCLS formula as provided in NECA's August 28, 2024 submission.

¹¹ See NECA 2025 Filing at 1-28.

¹² These figures exclude average schedule companies that were included in NECA's 2024 Filing and the associated estimates provided in the *2024 Order*, but were authorized to receive Enhanced A-CAM and therefore did not receive HCLS in 2024. See *2024 Order*, 38 FCC Rcd 11921, n.12.

¹³ See NECA 2025 Filing at 1. At the time of NECA's 2025 filing, 67 average schedule carriers were eligible for HCLS, but 8 would receive no HCLS pursuant to the formula we adopt here. *Id.* at 2. In addition, 192 average schedule companies receive support pursuant the Alternative Connect America Model or Alaska Plan, and are not eligible for HCLS. See NECA 2025 Filing at 2 n.8.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 2.

¹⁵ For 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024, approved high-cost loop average schedule formulas were estimated to result in total payments of \$4.022, \$6.034, \$6.88, and \$4.93 million, respectively. See *2021 Order*, 35 FCC Rcd at 14020, para. 6 n. 11; *2022 Order*, DA 21-1552 at 3, para. 6 n.11; *2023 Order*, DA 22-1273 at 3 para. 6 n.11, *2024 Order*, DA-23-1159 at 3 para 6 n. 12. We note that the current amount of support expected to be paid for 2024—\$4.93 million—is less than the amount that was projected when NECA submitted its original average schedule formula for 2024, due primarily to the ineligibility for HCLS of 13 average schedule companies that elected Enhanced A-CAM. See *2024 NECA Modification of the Average Schedule Universal Service High-Cost Loop Support Formula*, WC Docket No. 05-337 (filed Aug. 29, 2023). At that time, NECA estimated that the CPL formula would result in total payments of \$6.19 million for 2024. See *id.* at 1; NECA 2024 Filing at 1.

¹⁶ See, e.g., *2021 Order*, 35 FCC Rcd at 14021, para. 7; *2022 Order*, DA 21-1552 at 3, para. 7; *2023 Order*, DA 22-1273 at 3, para. 7; *2024 Order*, DA 23-1159 at 3, para. 7.

IV. ORDERING CLAUSE

8. Accordingly, IT IS ORDERED, pursuant to sections 0.91 and 0.291 of the Commission's rules, 47 CFR §§ 0.91, 0.291, that the average schedule cost per loop formula proposed by the National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc. on August 28, 2024 for high-cost loop support IS ADOPTED, as described herein, effective as of January 1, 2025.

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

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