### BEFORE THE PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI

## PEARL RIVER VALLEY COMMUNICATIONS, LLC

#### DOCKET NO. 2021-UA-014

## RE: APPLICATION FOR DESIGNATION AS AN ELIGIBLE TELECOMMUNICATIONS CARRIER TO RECEIVE RURAL DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY FUND PHASE I AUCTION (AUCTION 904) SUPPORT FOR VOICE AND BROADBAND SERVICES

### **RECOMMENDED ORDER**

On January 6, 2021, Pearl River Valley Communications, LLC ("PRVC" or "Company") filed with the Mississippi Public Service Commission ("Commission"), an application for designation as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier ("ETC"), pursuant to Section 214(e)(2) of the Communications Act of 1934, as amended (the "Act"), and in accordance with other applicable rules and orders of the Commission,<sup>1</sup> seeking ETC designation in all areas where PRVC has been conditionally allocated Rural Digital Opportunity Fund ("RDOF") Phase I support by the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC"), as well as Lifeline-only ETC designation status in additional areas. Please see Exhibit A attached hereto containing the application of PRVC for designation as an ETC.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In the Matter of Eligible Telecommunications Carrier Designation for Federal Universal Service Support, Docket No. 2005-AD-662, Order on Rehearing Reforming and Modernizing Universal Service Support and Adopting Changes of FCC Order 11-161 (adopted Nov. 15, 2012) ("November 2012 Order"). An "Eligible Telecommunications Carrier ('ETC') Checklist, Revised to Reflect Changes of FCC 11-161" ("ETC Checklist") is attached as Exhibit A of the November 2012 Order. In 2018, the Commission sought comment on amending the ETC Checklist, stating that "[a]fter receipt of comments and reply comments, the Commission will issue an appropriate Order regarding the revised checklist." In the Matter of ETC Designation for Federal Universal Service Support, Docket No. 2005-AD-662, Order Amending Checklist and Updating Reporting Requirements (adopted Nov. 6, 2018).

PRVC, a limited liability company organized and existing under the laws of the State of Mississippi, is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Pearl River Valley Electric Power Association ("PRVEPA"), a not-for-profit, member-owned electric cooperative. PRVEPA provides electric service to residential, commercial, industrial, and public facilities.

PRVC is engaged in deploying a new state-of-the-art, low-latency, fiber-to-the-home ("FTTH") network that will provide high-speed broadband and interconnected Voice over Internet Protocol ("VoIP") enabled voice services throughout the RDOF Phase I-eligible census blocks identified in Exhibit A1 and A2 of its ETC application and seeks High-Cost and Low-Income ETC designation from the Commission to serve these census blocks. In addition, PRVC seeks Lifeline-only ETC designation status in additional areas primarily consisting of TEPA's electric service footprint, identified in Exhibit A2 of its ETC application.

PRVC will offer low-latency broadband service at actual speeds of at least 1 gigabit per second (downlink) and 500 Mbps (uplink) and will offer at least 2 terabytes of monthly usage throughout its requested ETC designation area. In addition, PRVC will provide its customers with voice-grade access to the Public Switched Telephone Network ("PSTN") through its provision of interconnected VoIP-enabled voice service.

The Commission, being fully apprised in the premises and having considered the record before it, as authorized by law and the Commission's Public Utilities Rules of Practice and Procedure, and upon recommendation of the Mississippi Public Utilities Staff ("Staff"), finds as follows:

1. On January 30, 2020, the FCC issued a Report and Order enabling the FCC to move forward with Auction 904, committing up to \$16 billion over 10 years to support up to gigabit

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speed broadband networks in rural America wholly unserved by 25/3 Mbps.<sup>2</sup> The FCC allocated Auction 904 funding through a multi-round, reverse, descending clock auction favoring faster services with lower latency.

2. In a December 7, 2020 Public Notice, the FCC announced that the Rural Electric Cooperative Consortium ("RECC") was a winning bidder in the RDOF Phase I auction.<sup>3</sup> PRVC, a member of the RECC, was assigned 1,599 of the census blocks in Mississippi awarded by the RECC which includes a total of 15,356 eligible locations. As a result, PRVC is slated to receive a total of \$25,761,776.30 of RDOF Phase I support over 10 years.<sup>4</sup>

3. On February 2, 2021, the Commission issued an Order referring PRVC's ETC application to Commissioner Dane Maxwell, Southern District, for hearing, report and recommendation of an appropriate Order, or any other action necessary, pursuant to Miss. Code Ann. § 77-3-40(6).

4. Staff issued its First Set of Data Requests to PRVC on January 29, 2021, and PRVC submitted its Responses to Staff on February 26, 2021.

5. PRVC's receipt of RDOF Phase I Auction funding is conditioned upon PRVC obtaining designation as a High-Cost and Low-Income ETC in the census blocks identified in Exhibit A1 and A2 of its ETC application. By June 7, 2021, absent a waiver being granted by the FCC, PRVC must obtain ETC designation in all of the census blocks in which PRVC has been awarded RDOF Phase I support and submit appropriate documentation of such ETC designation to the FCC.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In the Matter of Rural Digital Opportunity Fund; Connect America Fund, Report and Order, 35 FCC Rcd 686 (2020).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I Auction (Auction 904) Closes; Winning Bidders Announced; FCC Form 683 Due January 29, 2021, Public Notice, 35 FCC Red 13888 (2020).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See <u>https://www.fcc.gov/file/20525/download</u>.

6. Section 254(e) of the Act provides that "only an eligible telecommunications carrier designated under section 214(e)(2) shall be eligible to receive specific federal universal service support."<sup>5</sup> Section 214(e)(2) of the Act provides that state commissions "shall designate" common carriers that meet the statutory requirements as ETCs. The FCC has ruled that Section 214(e)(2) of the Act "provides state commissions with the primary responsibility for designating ETCs."<sup>6</sup>

7. The Commission has stated that the FCC has "charge[d] states with the authority and obligation to certify that all federal high-cost and CAF [Connect America Fund] support is being used by carriers in a manner for which the support is intended[,]"<sup>7</sup> and that "Section 77-3-35 explicitly authorizes the Commission to regulate and further the provision of universal service ...."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the Commission has the authority and the primary responsibility under federal law to designate PRVC as an ETC for federal universal service support purposes. The *November* 2012 Order and Section I of the ETC Checklist establish the requirements that an applicant must meet in order to be designated as an ETC.

8. To be designated as an ETC, an applicant must be a common carrier.<sup>9</sup> For the customers and locations where RDOF Phase I support has been allocated, PRVC will provide its services on a common carrier basis. PRVC is a common carrier for purposes of Section 214(e) of the Act.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 214(e).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 254(e).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service, CC Docket No. 96-45, Report and Order, 20 FCC Rcd 6371, 6372 (¶ 1, n.2) (2005) (emphasis added) (interpreting 47 U.S.C. § 254(e)(2)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> November 2012 Order at 3 (¶ 8).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> *Id.* at ¶ 11 (citing M.C.A. § 77-35).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 214(e)(1) (providing that a "common carrier" must be designated as an ETC to receive universal service support). The Act defines a "common carrier" as "any person engaged as a common carrier for hire, in interstate or foreign communication by wire or radio or interstate or foreign radio transmission of energy ...." 47 U.S.C. § 153(11).

9. To be designated as an ETC, an applicant must offer throughout the area in which it proposed to be an ETC, the services set forth in Section 54.101(a) of the FCC's rules,<sup>11</sup> either by using its own facilities or a combination of its own facilities and the resale of another carrier's services. PRVC will offer, upon designation as an ETC, all of the supported services throughout the areas in which it is requesting designation as an ETC through the provision of VoIP-enabled voice communications service that is interconnected to the PSTN, as well as high-speed broadband services. The Company commits to provide these services consistent with applicable FCC rules relating to high-cost universal service support.<sup>12</sup>

10. PRVC will offer both voice telephony service throughout its proposed ETC designation area and will offer such service at rates that are reasonably comparable to urban rates. This service will include minutes of use for local service provided at no charge to end users and access to emergency service via E-911, wherever available from local government or public safety organizations. If required, PRVC also commits to provide toll limitation services to qualifying low-income consumers as provided in Sections 54.400-54.423 of the FCC's rules.<sup>13</sup>

11. PRVC's broadband Internet offering will provide the capability to transmit data to, and receive data from, all or substantially all Internet endpoints, including any capabilities that are incidental to, and enable the operation of, communications services.<sup>14</sup> As noted earlier, PRVC will

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> 47 CFR § 54.101(a).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> This commitment also complies with Section I.A.1.a. of the ETC Checklist (required services).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> *Id.*, §§ 54.400-54.423. PRVC's compliance and commitments with respect to the applicable federal rules also constitute compliance with Section I.A.4. of the ETC Checklist (voice telephony service). PRVC does not distinguish between toll and non-toll calls in the pricing of its services and, as a result, toll limitation services do not need to be offered for any Lifeline service offered by PRVC.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See 47 CFR § 54.101(a)(2) (stating that "[e]ligible broadband Internet access services must provide the capability to transmit data to and receive data by wire or radio from all or substantially all Internet endpoints, including any capabilities that are incidental to and enable the operation of the communications service, but excluding dial-up service").

(1) offer low-latency Internet service at actual speeds of at least 1 Gbps (downlink) and 500 Mbps (uplink); (2) offer at least 2 terabytes of monthly usage to customers within its proposed ETC designation area; and (3) offer such service at rates that are reasonably comparable to urban rates.

12. As required by Section 54.405(a) of the FCC's rules,<sup>15</sup> PRVC will offer subsidized Lifeline voice and broadband services, including a standalone voice service offering, to qualifying low-income consumers within its proposed ETC designation area and in accordance with the FCC's rules.<sup>16</sup>

13. PRVC will comply with the RDOF Phase I service requirements applicable to the federal universal service support that it receives,<sup>17</sup> including the requirements for receipt of RDOF Phase I support. Specifically, PRVC, as an FCC Form 683 applicant for RDOF Phase I support,<sup>18</sup> has:

a. certified to the FCC that it complies with all statutory and regulatory requirements for receiving the universal service support that it seeks as of the long-form application filing deadline;<sup>19</sup>

b. certified to the FCC that it is financially and technically capable of meeting the relevant public interest obligations for each performance tier and latency combination in the geographic areas in which it seeks support;<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> *Id.*, § 54.405(a).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> *Id.*, §§ 54.400-54.423.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> See ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.b.vi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Each Auction 904 winning bidder "is required to file an application for Rural Digital Opportunity Fund support, referred to as a long-form application …." Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I Auction Scheduled for October 29, 2020, Notice and Filing Requirements and Other Procedures for Auction 904, AU Docket No. 20-34, et al., Public Notice, 35 FCC Rcd 6077, 6163 (¶ 286) (2020) ("Auction 904 Public Notice").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Id. at 6165 (¶ 296) (citing 47 CFR § 54.804(b)(2)(v)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Id. at 6166 (¶ 298) (citing 47 CFR § 54.804(b)(2)(ii)).

c. certified to the FCC that it will meet the relevant public interest obligations for each performance tier and latency combination for which it was deemed a winning bidder, including the requirement that it will offer service at rates that are equal to or lower than the FCC's reasonable comparability benchmarks for fixed services offered in urban areas;<sup>21</sup>

d. demonstrated to the FCC that it has a design plan with supportable technologies to meet its RDOF Phase I public interest obligations in the areas covered by its winning bids, by submitting technical information to support the operational assertions made;<sup>22</sup> and

e. certified to the FCC that it will have available funds for all project costs that exceed the amount of RDOF support to be received for the first two years of its support term and also described how the required construction will be funded.<sup>23</sup>

14. PRVC's commitment to comply with the service requirements applicable to the federal universal service support that it receives satisfies the Commission's requirement that applicants for ETC designation must comply with these federal universal service requirements.<sup>24</sup>

15. PRVC commits that its FTTH network will have the ability to remain functional in emergency situations, will have a reasonable amount of back-up power to ensure functionality without an external power source, will be able to reroute traffic around damaged facilities, and will be capable of managing traffic spikes resulting from emergency situations.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Id. at 6166 (¶ 299) (citing 47 CFR § 54.804(b)(2)(iii)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Id. at 6167 (¶ 301) (citing 47 CFR § 54.804(b)(2)(iv)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Id. at 6174 (¶ 312) (citing 47 CFR §§ 54.804(b)(2)(v), 54.804(b)(2)(vi)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> See November 2012 Order at 5 (ordering clauses 3 and 4).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> See 47 CFR § 54.202(a)(2) (providing that a common carrier seeking an ETC designation by the FCC must "[d]emonstrate its ability to remain functional in emergency situations, including a demonstration that

16. Under the FCC's regulations, an ETC applicant must "[d]emonstrate that it will satisfy applicable consumer protection and service quality standards."<sup>26</sup> PRVC commits to satisfying all FCC requirements related to consumer protection and service quality standards. In addition, with respect to Lifeline service, PRVC commits that it will annually certify compliance with consumer protection and service quality rules consistent with Section 54.422(b)(3) of the FCC's rules.<sup>27</sup>

17. PRVC commits that it will offer the supported services specified in Section 214(e)(1)(A) of the Act<sup>28</sup> throughout its proposed ETC designation area.<sup>29</sup>

18. PRVC commits to comply with: (1) all applicable provisions of the Commission's Rules and Regulations Governing Public Utility Service;<sup>30</sup> (2) "designated service quality standards applicable to each carrier;"<sup>31</sup> and (3) the requirement to submit to the Commission the number of consumer complaints per 1,000 access lines, as required in annual ETC filings.<sup>32</sup>

19. PRVC commits that it will advertise the availability of its broadband and interconnected VoIP-enabled voice services, and their associated charges, in media of general

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*, § 54.422(b)(3).

<sup>28°</sup>47 U.S.C. § 214(e)(1)(A).

<sup>29</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.b.iv.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*, § I.A.3.b.i.

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it has a reasonable amount of back-up power to ensure functionality without an external power source, is able to reroute traffic around damaged facilities, and is capable of managing traffic spikes resulting from emergency situations"). PRVC's commitment also satisfies the requirements of Section I.A.2.a. of the ETC Checklist (emergency operations).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> 47 CFR § 54.202(a)(3).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> *Id.*, § I.A.3.b.ii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Id., § I.A.3.b.iii.

distribution,<sup>33</sup> and that it will include Lifeline services in its advertising materials.<sup>34</sup> PRVC will communicate its fiber availability and construction progress to its potential customers<sup>35</sup> in three or more, or any combination of, the following methods:

- a. Direct mail (e.g., postcards, letters);
- b. Door hangers or similar door-to-door communications;
- c. Electronic mail;
- d. Social media or similar electronic communications;
- e. Online (with the option to subscribe);
- f. Live events (with the option to subscribe); and/or
- g. Other forms of advertising.

20. PRVC will offer Lifeline service in compliance with FCC rules. The Commission's ETC Checklist requires information concerning Lifeline plans that an applicant for ETC designation intends to offer.<sup>36</sup> PRVC commits to implement its Lifeline plans in accordance with the current rules and policies adopted by the FCC.

21. PRVC will price its Lifeline service at discounted rates and pass through the monthly support amounts for voice and/or broadband services established by the FCC. PRVC's Lifeline service will represent a dollar-for-dollar reduction from its comparable non-Lifeline rates, providing a pass-through of the full amount of federal Lifeline support to qualifying customers.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*, § I.A.1.b.ii.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Id., § I.A.1.b.i. See 47 CFR § 54.201(d)(2).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.b.i.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Nothing herein shall be interpreted to require the disclosure of any competitive data or information by PRVC. PRVC may in its business judgment determine the timing of such communications. PRVC is expected to inform potential customers of the availability of service in advance of or, at a minimum, simultaneously with such service availability in specific areas. Upon request, PRVC shall also provide its best estimate as to service availability in response to customer inquiries.

22. PRVC commits to adhering to any FCC reporting requirements relating to the reporting of service outages, and also commits to provide copies of any such reports to the Commission, upon request.<sup>37</sup>

23. As a prerequisite to receiving RDOF support, PRVC is required to certify to the FCC "that it is financially and technically capable of meeting the relevant public interest obligations for each performance tier and latency combination in the geographic areas in which it seeks support."<sup>38</sup> With respect to financial resources, PRVC will be able to rely on PRVEPA for loan funds at market rates, advances of capital and loaned or leased employee support by PRVC, if necessary, in addition to the RDOF Phase I support being made available to the Applicant. In addition, PRVC must obtain an irrevocable standby letter of credit from a bank acceptable to the FCC.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, PRVC is financially capable of providing supported services in accordance with FCC and Commission rules.

24. With respect to technical capabilities, PRVC is required to submit a detailed technology and system design description that explains how the design and technologies chosen will meet the relevant performance requirements, including information regarding quality, coverage, voice service, network management and on-going operations. This submission must include a detailed network diagram. The network diagram must be certified by a professional engineer.<sup>40</sup> Further, PRVC must "provide a project plan that describes a network build-out

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> *Id.*, § I.A.2.b.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Auction 904 Public Notice, 35 FCC Rcd at 6166 (¶ 298) (footnote omitted).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 6177 (¶ 319).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> *Id.* (footnotes omitted). The FCC's requirements include a certification from a professional engineer that the long-form applicant's fiber optic network is capable of delivering voice and broadband service that meets the requisite performance requirements and is capable of providing sufficient capacity to meet customer demand at or above the prescribed levels during peak usage periods. *Id.* 

schedule that includes but is not restricted to plans for constructing last mile and middle mile facilities."<sup>41</sup> These various FCC requirements ensure that PRVC possesses the financial and technical capabilities to pay for all start-up expenses (*e.g.*, equipment, operations, *etc.*) to deploy its fiber optic network, and to begin the provision of interconnected VoIP-enabled voice and broadband services throughout its proposed ETC designation area.

25. Designating PRVC as an ETC will clearly serve the public interest by enabling the Company to provide low-latency, gigabit-speed broadband, and interconnected VoIP-enabled voice services, to consumers in its proposed ETC designation area, as well as to provide subsidized voice and broadband services to those households that seek and qualify for federal Lifeline benefits. PRVC is well-positioned to help close the digital divide in its service area, allowing improved access to health care, education services, and other social services, helping to create jobs and boosting the economy. Approval of PRVC's ETC application will help to address the urgent need to deliver broadband to rural Mississippi, enabling consumers and businesses in these regions of the state to have access to broadband services comparable to those in urban areas.

26. PRVC's service offerings will preserve and advance universal service<sup>42</sup> by providing unique advantages to consumers in its proposed ETC designation area. Most importantly, the Company's provision of high-speed broadband Internet access and interconnected VoIP-enabled voice services using a new state-of-the-art, low-latency, FTTH network will provide enormous benefits that previously have been beyond the reach of consumers and businesses in many of Mississippi's rural areas. The FTTH network will ensure reliable access to gigabit tier

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 6171 (¶ 307).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.B.1.

broadband, thus enhancing educational programs, promoting business growth, generating jobs, and expanding cultural opportunities for Mississippi residents.

27. Designation of PRVC as an ETC in Mississippi will also ensure the availability of quality services at just, reasonable, and affordable rates<sup>43</sup> by facilitating the provision of high-quality communications services to those living and working within its proposed ETC designation area.

28. PRVC seeks a waiver of the ETC Checklist requirement for the submission of a five-year improvements and upgrades plan. Such a waiver is appropriate because deployment obligations and timetables imposed on RDOF Phase I support recipients by the FCC are sufficient to ensure timely deployment of voice and broadband services, consistent with the policies reflected in the Commission's five-year plan requirement. Specifically, the FCC requires RDOF Phase I support recipients to commercially offer voice and broadband service to "40% of [a calculated] number of locations in a state by the end of the third full calendar year following funding authorization, and 20% each calendar year thereafter."<sup>44</sup> In addition, the FCC requires support recipients to file annual reports containing location and technology data, and to certify when they have met their service milestones.<sup>45</sup>

29. PRVC meets all the statutory and regulatory requirements for designation as an ETC in the State of Mississippi and is in full compliance with all applicable Commission orders, rules, and regulations and, therefore, is in good standing with the Commission.<sup>46</sup>

IT IS, THEREFORE, ORDERED by the Commission that:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.B.2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> RDOF Order, 35 FCC Rcd at 709 (¶ 45).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 712 (¶ 56).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.b.v.

1. PRVC, LLC's Application for Designation as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier to Receive Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I Auction (Auction 904) Support for Voice and Broadband Services in the State of Mississippi is hereby approved. Designation of PRVC as an ETC in the State of Mississippi in the census blocks identified in Exhibit A1 and A2 of its ETC application is in the public interest.

2. PRVC is hereby granted a waiver of the ETC Checklist requirement for the submission of a five-year improvements and upgrades plan. Such a waiver is appropriate because deployment obligations and timetables imposed on RDOF Phase I support recipients by the FCC are sufficient to ensure timely deployment of voice and broadband services, consistent with the policies reflected in the Commission's five-year plan requirement.

3. At least thirty days before offering service within its ETC designation area, PRVC shall provide an informational tariff for its ETC designated areas in Exhibits A1 and A2 that outlines its regulatory contact information, customer service contact, terms, and conditions as well as Lifeline Programs. PRVC will also post this same information on its website where rates, terms and conditions may be found.

4. PRVC will file any future changes to its informational tariff with the Commission at least seven days prior to the effective date of change.

5. At least thirty days before offering service within its ETC designation area, PRVC will provide Staff copies of marketing materials, including advertising specific to Lifeline.

6. PRVC will comply, where applicable, with service and reporting requirements of the FCC's High-Cost and Lifeline Programs, the Commission's ETC Docket 2005-AD-662, and the Commission's Lifeline Docket 2007-AD-487.

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## \*\*MPSC Electronic Copy \*\* 2021-UA-14 Filed on 04/06/2021 \*\*

7. Exceptions to this Recommended Order may be filed with the Commission within a period of fifteen (15) days from the date of issuance of this Order, in accordance with the provisions of Miss. Code Ann. § 77-3-40. If exceptions are not timely filed, this Recommended Order shall then become the Order of the Commission.

This Order shall be deemed issued on the day it is served upon the parties herein by the Executive Secretary of this Commission who shall note the service date in the file of this Docket. SO ORDERED and this the  $\int_{1}^{1} \int_{1}^{1} day$  of April, 2021.



MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

DANE MAXWELL, COMMISSIONER

ATTEST: A true copy

Katherine Collier, Executive Secretary

Effective this the  $\frac{\int h}{\int h}$  day of April, 2021.

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MISS. PUBLIC SERVICE

### Before the MISSISSIPPI PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

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Application of Pearl River Valley Communications, LLC For Designation as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier Pursuant to Section 214(e)(2) of the Communications Act of 1934 In the State of Mississippi

Docket No. '21 -UA-14 🔅

# APPLICATION OF PEARL RIVER VALLEY COMMUNICATIONS, LLC FOR DESIGNATION AS AN ELIGIBLE TELECOMMUNICATIONS CARRIER

Pursuant to Section 214(e)(2) of the Communications Act of 1934 (the "Act"),<sup>1</sup> the No-

vember 2012 Order,<sup>2</sup> and other applicable rules and orders of the Commission, Pearl River Valley

Communications, LLC ("PRVC," the "Applicant," or the "Company"), hereby files this Applica-

tion with the Mississippi Public Service Commission ("Commission") for designation as an Eligi-

ble Telecommunications Carrier ("ETC") in the State of Mississippi.

This designation is sought in all areas where PRVC, through the participation of its parent,

Pearl River Valley Electric Power Association ("PRVEPA" or "Association") in the Rural Electric

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 214(e)(2).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In the Matter of Eligible Telecommunications Carrier Designation for Federal Universal Service Support, Docket No. 2005-AD-662, Order on Rehearing Reforming and Modernizing Universal Service Support and Adopting Changes of FCC Order 11-161 (adopted Nov. 15, 2012) (November 2012 Order"). An "Eligible Telecommunications Carrier ('ETC') Checklist, Revised to Reflect Changes of FCC 11-161" ("ETC Checklist") is attached as Exhibit A of the November 2012 Order. In 2018, the Commission sought comment on amending the ETC Checklist, stating that "[a]fter receipt of comments and reply comments, the Commission will issue an appropriate Order regarding the revised checklist." In the Matter of ETC Designation for Federal Universal Service Support, Docket No. 2005-AD-662, Order Amending Checklist and Updating Reporting Requirements (adopted Nov. 6, 2018). Further Commission action is pending.

Cooperative Consortium, has been allocated Rural Digital Opportunity Fund ("RDOF") Phase I support by the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") as a winner in the RDOF Phase I auction ("Auction 904"),<sup>3</sup> as well as Lifeline-only ETC designation status in additional areas.

## I. INTRODUCTION.

PRVC meets all of the statutory and regulatory requirements and prerequisites for ETC designation by the Commission. Designation of PRVC as an ETC in the State of Mississippi will serve the public interest by enabling the Company to provide subsidized voice and gigabit tier broadband services to consumers and businesses in rural areas that it proposes to serve.

If designated as an ETC, PRVC will use high-cost support to assist with the deployment of its voice and gigabit tier broadband network to serve consumers throughout its proposed ETC designation area; to offer and maintain high-quality voice and broadband services to customers; and to ensure the reliability of its network providing advanced broadband services to the public. Additionally, PRVC will provide Lifeline discounted service to qualifying low-income customers who reside within the Company's service areas in the State of Mississippi and who may otherwise not be able to afford service.

PRVC is obligated by the FCC to obtain ETC designation status by June 7, 2021, which is 180 days after the announcement by the FCC on December 7, 2020, that the Company is a winning bidder in the RDOF Phase I auction in the census blocks in which the Company was awarded

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I Auction (Auction 904) Closes, Winning Bidders Announced, FCC Form 683 Due January 29, 2021, AU Docket No. 20-34, WC Docket No. 19-126, WC Docket No. 10-90, FCC Public Notice, DA 20-1422 (Dec. 7, 2020). The Rural Electric Cooperative Consortium submitted a short-form application in the RDOF Phase I auction that included PRVEPA as a consortium member.

RDOF Phase I support.<sup>4</sup> As a result, PRVC requests expeditious action by the Commission so that the Company may meet this FCC requirement.

Please address all correspondence, communications, pleadings, notices, orders, and decisions relating to this Application to:

> Lawrence E. Hahn McNeese & Hahn, PLLC 338 Church Street P.O. Drawer 948 Columbia, MS 39429 E-mail: lhahn@mcneesehahn.com

# II. BACKGROUND.

PRVC is a wholly-owned subsidiary of PRVEPA, a non-profit rural electric cooperative that is owned by its members, and is organized and existing under the laws of the State of Mississippi. PRVEPA received its certificate of incorporation from the Mississippi Secretary of State in 1938. The Association currently serves its members in Covington, Forrest, Jefferson Davis, George, Jackson, Perry, Lamar, Lawrence, Marion, Pearl River, Stone, and Walthall counties.<sup>5</sup> It has 6,131 total miles of lines and more than 51,000 meters served.<sup>6</sup>

PRVC, a domestic limited liability company formed in the State of Mississippi in August of this year, will, in coordination with PRVEPA, deploy and operate a new state-of-the-art, lowlatency, fiber-to-the-home ("FTTH") network, and will provide high-speed broadband Internet access and interconnected Voice over Internet Protocol ("VoIP")-based voice services to customers in its service area, many of whom currently lack any access to such services. PRVC will eventually make access to FTTH services available to all members in PRVEPA's service area.

<sup>5</sup> PRVEPA Website, accessed at <u>https://www.prvepa.com/my-co-op</u>. <sup>6</sup> Id.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, et al., WC Docket No. 19-126, et al., Report and Order, 35 FCC Rcd 686, 727 (¶ 92) (2020) ("RDOF Order") (establishing the 180-day deadline).

PRVC will deploy broadband and interconnected VoIP-based voice services throughout the RDOF Phase I-eligible census blocks identified in <u>Exhibit A1</u> and seeks High-Cost and Low-Income (Lifeline) ETC designation from the Commission to serve these census blocks. In addition, Applicant seeks Lifeline-only ETC designation status in additional areas primarily consisting of PRVEPA's electric service footprint, identified in <u>Exhibit A2</u>. A map of PRVC's proposed ETC designation area is displayed in <u>Exhibit B</u>.

PRVC will offer low-latency broadband service at actual speeds of at least 1 gigabit per second downstream and 500 Mbps upstream, and will offer at least 2 terabytes of monthly usage. In addition, Applicant will provide its customers with voice-grade access to the Public Switched Telephone Network ("PSTN") through its provision of interconnected VoIP service.

PRVC is in full compliance with all applicable Commission orders, rules, and regulations, and therefore is in good standing with the Commission.<sup>7</sup>

# **III. THE COMMISSION HAS JURISDICTION AND AUTHORITY TO DESIGNATE ELIGIBLE TELECOMMUNICATIONS CARRIERS.**

Section 254(e) of the Act provides that "only an eligible telecommunications carrier designated under section 214(e)(2) shall be eligible to receive specific federal universal service support."<sup>8</sup> Section 214(e)(2) of the Act provides that state commissions "shall designate" common carriers that meet the statutory requirements as ETCs. The FCC has ruled that Section 214(e)(2) of the Act "provides state commissions with the *primary* responsibility for designating ETCs."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the Commission has stated that the FCC has "charge[d] states with the authority and obligation to certify that all federal high-cost and CAF [Connect America Fund] support is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.b.v.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 254(e).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service, CC Docket No. 96-45, Report and Order, 20 FCC Rcd 6371, 6372 (¶ 1, n.2) (2005) (emphasis added) (interpreting 47 U.S.C. § 254(e)(2)).

being used by carriers in a manner for which the support is intended[,]"<sup>10</sup> and that "Section 77-3-35 explicitly authorizes the Commission to regulate and further the provision of universal service ...."<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the Commission has the authority and the primary responsibility under federal law to designate PRVC as an ETC for federal universal service support purposes. The *November 2012 Order* and Section I of the ETC Checklist establish the requirements that an applicant must meet in order to be designated as an ETC.

# IV. PRVC MEETS ALL FEDERAL AND STATE STATUTORY AND REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS TO BE DESIGNATED AS AN ELIGIBLE TELECOMMUNICATIONS CARRIER.

As demonstrated in the following sections, PRVC satisfies each of the statutory and regulatory requirements for designation as an ETC, as set forth in the Act, in the FCC's rules, and in the rules and orders of the Commission.

# A. PRVC Will Provide Service as a Common Carrier.

To be designated as an ETC, an applicant must be a common carrier.<sup>12</sup> For the customers

and locations where RDOF Phase I support has been allocated, PRVC will provide its services on

a common carrier basis. PRVC is a common carrier for purposes of Section 214(e) of the Act.<sup>13</sup>

# B. PRVC Will Offer the Services Supported by the Federal Universal Service Support Mechanisms.

<sup>13</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 214(e).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> November 2012 Order at 3 (¶ 8).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Id. at ¶ 11 (citing M.C.A. §77-35).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 214(e)(1) (providing that a "common carrier" must be designated as an ETC to receive universal service support). The Act defines a "common carrier" as "any person engaged as a common carrier for hire, in interstate or foreign communication by wire or radio or interstate or foreign radio transmission of energy ....." 47 U.S.C. § 153(11).

To be designated as an ETC, an applicant must offer throughout its proposed service areas the services set forth in Section 54.101(a) of the FCC's rules,<sup>14</sup> either by using its own facilities or a combination of its own facilities and the resale of another carrier's services.

PRVC commits to offer all of the services designated for support by the FCC.<sup>15</sup> As discussed in the following sections, the Company will offer, upon designation as an ETC, all of the supported services throughout the areas in which the Company is requesting designation as an ETC. The Company commits to provide these services consistent with applicable FCC rules relating to high-cost universal service support.<sup>16</sup>

# 1. Voice Grade Access to the Public Switched Telephone Network.

Section 54.101(b) of the FCC's rules states that an ETC must provide "voice telephony

service" in order to receive federal universal support.<sup>17</sup> Section 54.101(a)(1) provides that:

Eligible voice telephony services must provide voice grade access to the public switched network or its functional equivalent; minutes of use for local service provided at no additional charge to end users; access to the emergency services provided by local government or other public safety organizations, such as 911 and enhanced 911, to the extent the local government in an eligible carrier's service area has implemented 911 or enhanced 911 systems; and toll limitation services to qualifying low-income consumers ....<sup>18</sup>

PRVC will meet this requirement through the provision of VoIP-based voice communica-

tions service that is interconnected to the PSTN. The Company will be legally responsible for

<sup>16</sup> This commitment also complies with Section I.A.1.a. of the ETC Checklist (required services).

<sup>17</sup> 47 CFR § 54.101(b).

<sup>18</sup> Id., § 54.101(a)(1).

<sup>14 47</sup> CFR § 54.101(a).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> See Designation of Fort Mojave Telecommunications, Inc., et al., as Eligible Telecommunications Carriers Pursuant to Section 214(e)(6) of the Communications Act, AAD/USB File No. 98-28, Memorandum Opinion and Order, 13 FCC Rcd 4547, 4552 (¶ 11) (CCB, OMD 1998) ("Fort Mojave"). In Fort Mojave, the Common Carrier Bureau and the Office of the Managing Director indicated that the FCC will designate carriers as ETCs, pursuant to Section 214(e)(6) of the Act, upon finding that they "offer or will be able to offer" the supported services throughout the service area.

dealing with customer problems, providing quality of service guarantees, and meeting universal service-related requirements.

PRVC will offer stand-alone voice telephony service throughout its proposed ETC designation area and will offer such service at rates that are reasonably comparable to urban rates. This service will include minutes of use for local service provided at no charge to end users and access to emergency service via E-911, wherever available from local government or public safety organizations. The Company also commits to provide toll limitation services to qualifying low-income consumers as provided in Sections 54.400-54.423 of the FCC's rules.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Broadband Internet Access Services.

PRVC's broadband Internet offering will provide the capability to transmit data to, and receive data from, all or substantially all Internet endpoints, including any capabilities that are incidental to, and enable the operation of, communications services.<sup>20</sup> Applicant will (1) offer low-latency Internet service at actual speeds of at least 1 Gbps downstream and 500 Mbps upstream; (2) offer at least 2 terabytes of monthly usage to customers within its proposed ETC designation area; and (3) offer such service at rates that are reasonably comparable to urban rates.

3. Lifeline Service.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Id., §§ 54.400-54.423. PRVC's compliance and commitments with respect to the applicable federal rules also constitute compliance with Section I.A.4. of the ETC Checklist (voice telephony service).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> See 47 CFR § 54.101(a)(2) (stating that "[e]ligible broadband Internet access services must provide the capability to transmit data to and receive data by wire or radio from all or substantially all Internet endpoints, including any capabilities that are incidental to and enable the operation of the communications service, but excluding dial-up service").

As required by Section 54.405(a) of the FCC's rules,<sup>21</sup> PRVC will offer subsidized Lifeline voice and broadband services, including a standalone voice service offering, to qualifying low-income consumers within its proposed ETC designation area in accordance with the FCC's rules.<sup>22</sup>

# C. PRVC Will Comply with Applicable Service and Performance Quality Requirements Adopted by the FCC.

PRVC will comply with the RDOF service requirements applicable to the federal universal service support that it receives,<sup>23</sup> including the requirements for receipt of RDOF Phase I support. Specifically, PRVC, as a "long-form" applicant for RDOF Phase I support,<sup>24</sup> must:

(1) certify in its long-form application filed with the FCC that it complies with all statutory and regulatory requirements for receiving the universal service support that it seeks as of the long-form application filing deadline;<sup>25</sup>

(2) certify to the FCC that it is financially and technically capable of meeting the relevant public interest obligations for each performance tier and latency combination in the geographic areas in which it seeks support;<sup>26</sup>

(3) certify to the FCC that it will meet the relevant public interest obligations for each performance tier and latency combination for which it was deemed a winning bidder,

<sup>25</sup> Id. at 6165 (¶ 296) (citing 47 CFR § 54.804(b)(2)(v)).

<sup>26</sup> Id. at 6166 (¶ 298) (citing 47 CFR § 54.804(b)(2)(ii)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Id., § 54.405(a).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Id., §§ 54.400-54.423.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> See ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.b.vi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Each Auction 904 winning bidder "is required to file an application for Rural Digital Opportunity Fund support, referred to as a long-form application ...." Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I Auction Scheduled for October 29, 2020, Notice and Filing Requirements and Other Procedures for Auction 904, AU Docket No. 20-34, et al., Public Notice, 35 FCC Rcd 6077, 6163 (¶ 286) (2020) ("Auction 904 Public Notice").

including the requirement that it will offer service at rates that are equal to or lower than the FCC's reasonable comparability benchmarks for fixed services offered in urban areas;<sup>27</sup>

(4) demonstrate to the FCC that it has a design plan with supportable technologies to meet the relevant RDOF public interest obligations in the areas covered by the winning bids, by submitting technical information to support the operational assertions made in the short-form application;<sup>28</sup> and

(5) certify to the FCC that it will have available funds for all project costs that exceed the amount of RDOF support to be received for the first two years of its support term, and also describe how the required construction will be funded.<sup>29</sup>

PRVC's commitment to comply with the service requirements applicable to the federal universal service support that it receives satisfies the Commission's requirement that applicants for ETC designation must comply with these federal service requirements.<sup>30</sup>

# D. Ability to Remain Functional in Emergency Situations.

PRVC commits that its fiber optic network will have the ability to remain functional in emergency situations, will have a reasonable amount of back-up power to ensure functionality without an external power source, will be able to reroute traffic around damaged facilities, and will be capable of managing traffic spikes resulting from emergency situations.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Id. at 6166 (¶ 299) (citing 47 CFR § 54.804(b)(2)(iii)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Id. at 6167 (¶ 301) (citing 47 CFR § 54.804(b)(2)(iv)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Id. at 6174 (¶ 312) (citing 47 CFR §§ 54.804(b)(2)(v), 54.804(b)(2)(vi)).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> See November 2012 Order at 5 (ordering clauses 3 and 4).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> See 47 CFR § 54.202(a)(2) (providing that a common carrier seeking an ETC designation by the FCC must "[d]emonstrate its ability to remain functional in emergency situations, including a demonstration that it has a reasonable amount of back-up power to ensure functionality without an external power source, is able to reroute traffic around damaged facilities, and is capable of managing traffic spikes resulting from emergency situations"). PRVC's commitment also satisfies the requirements of Section I.A.2.a. of the ETC Checklist (emergency operations).

# E. Satisfaction of Applicable Consumer Protection and Service Quality Standards.

Under the FCC's regulations, an ETC applicant must "[d]emonstrate that it will satisfy applicable consumer protection and service quality standards."<sup>32</sup> PRVC commits to satisfying all FCC requirements related to consumer protection and service quality standards. In addition, with respect to Lifeline service, Applicant commits that it will annually certify compliance with consumer protection and service quality rules consistent with Section 54.422(b)(3) of the FCC's rules.<sup>33</sup>

# F. PRVC Meets the Requirements Adopted by the Mississippi Public Service Commission To Be Designated as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier.

PRVC will meet each of the requirements applicable to ETCs adopted by the Commission, as described in the following sections.

# 1. Offering of Supported Services in Proposed ETC Designation Area.

PRVC commits that it will offer the supported services specified in Section 214(e)(1)(A) of the Act<sup>34</sup> in its proposed ETC designation area.<sup>35</sup>

# 2. Consumer Protection.

In addition to complying with federal requirements, as discussed in Section IV.E., *supra*, PRVC commits to comply with (1) all applicable provisions of the Commission's Rules and Reg-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> 47 CFR § 54.202(a)(3).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Id., § 54.422(b)(3).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> 47 U.S.C. § 214(e)(1)(A).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.b.iv.

ulations Governing Public Utility Service, along with any amendments made in the future proceeding regarding RDOF ETCs;<sup>36</sup> (2) "designated service quality standards applicable to each carrier;"<sup>37</sup> and (3) the requirement to submit to the Commission the number of consumer complaints per 1,000 access lines, as required in annual ETC filings.<sup>38</sup>

## 3. Advertising.

PRVC commits that it will advertise the availability of its broadband and interconnected VoIP-based voice services, and their associated charges, in media of general distribution,<sup>39</sup> and that it will include Lifeline services in its advertising materials.<sup>40</sup>

## 4. Lifeline Plans.

As noted in Section IV.B.3., *supra*, PRVC will offer Lifeline service in compliance with the FCC's rules. The ETC Checklist requires information concerning Lifeline plans that an applicant for ETC designation intends to offer.<sup>41</sup> PRVC commits to implement its Lifeline plans in accordance with the current rules, policies, and requirements adopted by the FCC.

PRVC will price its Lifeline voice and broadband services at discounted rates and pass through the monthly support amounts for voice and broadband services established by the FCC and in effect from time to time. Therefore, PRVC's Lifeline service will represent a dollar-fordollar reduction from its comparable non-Lifeline rates, and will represent a pass-through of the full amount of Lifeline support to the qualifying Lifeline consumer.

- 38 Id., § I.A.3.b.iii.
- <sup>39</sup> Id., § I.A.1.b.i. See 47 CFR § 54.201(d)(2).
- <sup>40</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.b.i.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Id., § I.A.3.b.i.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Id., § I.A.3.b.ii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Id., § I.A.1.b.ii.

## 5. Contact Information for Consumer Inquiries.

The following contact information for PRVC's designated representative is provided for the purpose of assisting in the resolution of any customer service, quality of service, or Lifeline inquiries:<sup>42</sup>

> Leif Munkel – Manager, Member Services Pearl River Valley Communications, LLC 1422 Hwy. 13 North Columbia, MS 39429 601-736-2666 Email – lmunkel@prvepa.com

The designated representative shall be aware of the Commission's jurisdiction over consumer protection standards regarding ETCs and shall be familiar with the Commission's Rules Governing Public Utility Service and any subsequent orders of the Commission regarding customer service and quality of service obligations. The designated representative shall comply with any reporting requirements regarding any Commission action on customer service, quality of service or Lifeline inquiries or other Commission action on customer service, quality of service or Lifeline inquiries or other Commission action regarding ETC obligations. In the event that PRVC replaces the designated representative, notice and contact information provided herein shall be filed with the Commission within seven days.

#### 6. Outage Reporting.

PRVC commits to adhering to any FCC reporting requirements relating to the reporting of service outages, and also commits to provide copies of any such reports to the Commission, upon request.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Id., § I.A.1.b.iii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> *Id.*, § I.A.2.b.

# V. PRVC HAS SUFFICIENT FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND TECHNICAL CAPABILITIES TO PROVIDE THE SUPPORTED SERVICES.

As noted in Section IV.C., *supra*, as a prerequisite to receiving RDOF support, PRVC is required to certify to the FCC "that it is financially and technically capable of meeting the relevant public interest obligations for each performance tier and latency combination in the geographic areas in which it seeks support."<sup>44</sup> PRVC will be able to rely upon the resources of PRVEPA, it will be able to obtain requisite amounts of lending pursuant to available lines of credit, and PRVC and PRVEPA will be able to obtain additional financing, if necessary, in addition to the RDOF Phase I support being made available to PRVC. In addition, PRVC must obtain an irrevocable standby letter of credit from a bank acceptable to the FCC.<sup>45</sup>

With respect to technical capabilities, PRVC must "demonstrate that it has a design plan with supportable technologies to meet the relevant Rural Digital Opportunity Fund public interest obligations in the areas covered by the winning bids by submitting technical information to support the operational assertions made in the short-form application."<sup>46</sup> In addition, the Company:

is required to submit a detailed technology and system design description that explains how the design and technologies chosen will meet the relevant performance requirements, including information regarding quality, coverage, voice service, network management and on-going operations. This submission must include a detailed network diagram. The network diagram must be certified by a professional engineer.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Id. at 6166 (¶ 301).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Auction 904 Public Notice, 35 FCC Rcd at 6166 (¶ 298) (footnote omitted).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Id. at 6177 (¶ 319).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> *Id.* (footnotes omitted). The FCC's requirements include a certification from a professional engineer that the long-form applicant's fiber optic network is capable of delivering voice and broadband service that meets the requisite performance requirements, and is capable of providing sufficient capacity to meet customer demand at or above the prescribed levels during peak usage periods. *Id.* 

The Company also must "provide a project plan that describes a network build-out schedule that includes but is not restricted to plans for constructing last mile and middle mile facilities."<sup>48</sup>

These various FCC requirements ensure that PRVC possesses the financial and technical capabilities to pay for all start-up expenses (*e.g.*, equipment, operations, *etc.*) to deploy a fiber optic network, and to begin the provision of interconnected VoIP-based voice service and broad-band service throughout its proposed ETC designation area.

## VI. DESIGNATION OF PRVC AS AN ELIGIBLE TELECOMMUNICATIONS CARRIER WILL SERVE THE PUBLIC INTEREST.

The Commission's rules require it to undertake a public interest analysis of an application for ETC designation, which is carried out in a manner consistent with the Act and FCC rules,<sup>49</sup> and which considers whether an applicant for ETC designation has satisfied public interest criteria, considering general goals established by the Commission.<sup>50</sup>

The grant of this Application, designating PRVC as an ETC, will clearly serve the public interest by enabling the Company to utilize RDOF support<sup>51</sup> to provide low-latency, gigabit-speed broadband, and interconnected VoIP-based voice services, to consumers in its proposed ETC designation area, as well as to provide subsidized voice and broadband services to those households that seek and qualify for federal Lifeline benefits.

<sup>49</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.B. (citing 47 U.S.C. §§ 214(e)(2), 254; 47 CFR §§ 54.201(c), 54.202(b)).

<sup>50</sup> Id.

03/FromtheDeskOfBB\_RURALBROADBAND\_INTERNETISSUES.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Id. at 6171 (¶ 307).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Focusing on the importance of the availability of federal funding for use in the deployment of broadband services in rural Mississippi, the Commission has been "monitor[ing] the progress of the RDOF [program] and roll out of the rules guiding the reverse auction format and he maps that the FCC will use to determine area eligibility." Rural Broadband/Internet Issues, FCC Approves \$20.4 Billion Rural Broadband Fund, From the Desk of Commissioner Brent Bailey, Central District Office (Mar. 16, 2020), accessed at https://www.psc.ms.gov/sites/default/files/2020-

The Commission has been actively engaged in addressing the needs of consumers and businesses in rural Mississippi for access to advanced broadband services. In April of this year, for example, the Commission, in a letter to Mississippi's U.S. Senator Roger Wicker, urged that the disbursement of RDOF Phase I funding should be expedited to help improve Internet access in rural communities throughout Mississippi.<sup>52</sup> The Commission stressed that:

the severe lack of broadband Internet for all Mississippians has been brought to the forefront and cannot be overstated .... Teachers and students are conducting distance learning. Health care professionals are relying on telemedicine .... It is undeniable that the success of these efforts and functions rely on an essential service that simply does not exist.<sup>53</sup>

Grant of this Application will further help to address the urgent need to deliver broadband to rural Mississippi, enabling consumers and businesses in these regions of the state to have access to broadband services comparable to those in urban areas.

## A. Preserving and Advancing Universal Service.

PRVC's service offerings will preserve and advance universal service<sup>54</sup> by providing unique advantages to consumers in its proposed ETC designation area. Most importantly, the Company's deployment of a new state-of-the-art, low-latency, FTTH network, providing high-speed broadband Internet access and interconnected VoIP services, will provide enormous benefits that previously have been beyond the reach of consumers and businesses in many of Mississippi's rural areas. The Company's FTTH network will ensure reliable access to gigabit tier broadband, thus enhancing educational programs, promoting business growth, generating jobs, and expanding opportunities for Mississippi residents.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Taylor Vance, "Mississippi Utility Commission Urges Broadband Investment," NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI DAILY JOURNAL (Apr. 30, 2020), accessed at <u>https://www.govtech.com/network/Mississippi-Utility-Com-mission-Urges-Broadband-Investment.html</u>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.B.1.

# B. Ensuring the Availability of Quality Services at Just, Reasonable, and Affordable Rates.

A principal goal of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 is to "promote competition and reduce regulation in order to secure lower prices and high-quality services for American telecommunications consumers and encourage the rapid deployment of new telecommunications technologies."<sup>55</sup> As a general matter, designation of competitive ETCs increases facilities and promotes development and deployment of advanced communications as carriers compete for consumers' business.

Designation of PRVC as an ETC in Mississippi will ensure the availability of quality services at just, reasonable, and affordable rates<sup>56</sup> by facilitating the provision of high-quality communications services to those living and working within its proposed ETC designation area. Residents in many rural areas in Mississippi have long been unable to gain access to competitive voice service and advanced broadband services that are available to consumers living in urban areas in the State. In some rural areas, no meaningful choices for telephone and broadband services exist.

The Company's deployment of low-latency, high-speed broadband service and high-quality VoIP phone services will help to address these issues, will promote economic development in the rural areas the Company will serve, and, significantly, will help to ensure that consumers in its proposed ETC designation area will be able to subscribe to quality services at just, reasonable, and affordable rates.

## C. Promoting the Deployment of Advanced Telecommunications Services and Information Services in Rural and High-Cost Areas.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (1996) (preamble).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.B.2.

In the *RDOF Order*, the FCC explains that "[b]ringing digital opportunity to Americans living on the wrong side of the digital divide continues to be the Federal Communication Commission's top priority.... Without access to broadband, rural communities cannot connect to the digital economy and the opportunities for better education, employment, healthcare, and civic and social engagement it provides."<sup>57</sup>

There are compelling grounds for the Commission to conclude that granting PRVC's application for ETC designation is in the public interest because Applicant will utilize RDOF support to bring state-of-the-art low-latency, gigabit-speed broadband service to rural consumers, businesses, and communities in Mississippi. The Commission's action in granting this Application will promote this deployment, for the benefit of rural areas in Mississippi that have long been on the wrong side of the digital divide.

## VII. REQUEST FOR WAIVER OF REQUIREMENT TO SUBMIT A FIVE-YEAR UPGRADES OR IMPROVEMENTS PLAN.

The Commission's ETC Checklist requires that, to be eligible for an ETC designation, "[a]t the time of filing for designation, the ETC applicant shall be expected to submit a five year plan that describes with specificity the proposed improvements or upgrades to the applicant's network throughout its proposed service area ....<sup>358</sup>

PRVC seeks a waiver of this ETC Checklist requirement for the submission of a five-year improvements and upgrades plan. Such a waiver is appropriate because deployment obligations and timetables imposed on RDOF Phase I support recipients by the FCC in the *RDOF Order* are sufficient to ensure timely deployment of voice and broadband services, consistent with the policies reflected in the Commission's five-year plan requirement.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> RDOF Order, 35 FCC Rcd at 687 (¶ 1).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> ETC Checklist, § I.A.1.c.

Specifically, the FCC requires RDOF Phase I support recipients to commercially offer voice and broadband service to "40% of [a calculated] number of locations in a state by the end of the third full calendar year following funding authorization, and 20% each calendar year thereafter."<sup>59</sup> In addition, the FCC requires support recipients to file annual reports containing location and technology data, and to certify when they have met their service milestones.<sup>60</sup>

The FCC has previously decided that similar service milestones and reporting requirements applicable to Connect America Fund ("CAF") Phase II support recipients warranted waiver by the FCC of its requirement, in Section 54.202(a)(1)(ii) of its rules,<sup>61</sup> that support recipients must file five-year improvement plans. The FCC found that its detailed buildout obligations for CAF Phase II support recipients provide a "more defined yardstick [than the five-year improvement plans] by which to measure [carriers'] progress towards the universal availability of voice and broadband service in their areas .....<sup>62</sup>

Significantly, the Commission also has waived its ETC Checklist five-year plan requirement in response to a request for waiver made by an applicant for ETC designation. Specifically, the Commission found that Aristotle Unified Communications, Inc. ("AUC"), was entitled to a waiver of the ETC Checklist requirement because of the build-out plan requirements the FCC had adopted for CAF Phase II support recipients.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> RDOF Order, 35 FCC Rcd at 709 (¶ 45).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Id. at 712 (¶ 56).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> 47 CFR § 54.202(a)(1)(ii).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> WCB Reminds Connect America Fund Phase II Auction Applicants of the Process for Obtaining a Federal Designation as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier, WC Docket No. 09-197, et al., Public Notice, 33 FCC Rcd 6696, 6700 & n.34 (quotation marks and citation omitted).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Aristotle Unified Communications, Inc., Application for Designation as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier for Purpose of Receiving Federal Universal Service Support for the Purpose of Receiving Support from the FCC Connect America Fund Phase II, Docket No. 2018-UA-224, Order (Feb. 5, 2019), at 6 (¶ 17) (finding that, in light of the FCC's build-out plan requirements, "AUC is entitled to a waiver").

Based on the FCC's RDOF Phase I build-out and reporting requirements, and the Commission's decision in the AUC proceeding, PRVC requests that the Commission waive the requirement of ETC Checklist Section I.A.1.c., relating to the submission of a five-year improvements and upgrades plan. If the waiver is granted, then the Company will make available to the Commission all reports it is required to file with the FCC in connection with the funding awarded in the RDOF Phase I auction.

### VIII. CONCLUSION.

For all of the foregoing reasons, PRVC LLC respectfully requests that the Commission designate PRVC as both a high-cost and low-income Eligible Telecommunications Carrier, so that PRVC will be eligible to receive the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund Phase I support it has been awarded in Auction 904, as well as federal Lifeline support, throughout its proposed ETC designation area.

Respectfully submitted,

AWALLCE C

Lawrence E. Hahn, MSB No. 8954 McNeese & Hahn, PLLC 338 Church Street P.O. Drawer 948 Columbia, MS 39429 E-mail: lhahn@mcneesehahn.com

January 6, 2021

#### **VERIFICATION**

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STATE OF MISSISSIPPI COUNTY OF MARION

I, Matthew Ware, President of Pearl River Valley Communications, LLC, state that I am the President of Pearl River Valley Communications, LLC; that I have read the above and foregoing document; that the statements contained therein are true and correct to the best of my information, knowledge, and belief; and that I am authorized to make this statement on behalf of Pearl River Valley Communications, LLC.

Mathew Ware President Pearl River Valley Communications, LLC

\*\*MPSC Electronic Copy \*\* 2021-UA-14 Filed on 04/06/2021 \*\*

#### **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I, Lawrence E. Hahn, an attorney for Pearl River Valley Communications, LLC ("Applicant"), do hereby certify that I have filed the foregoing Application for Designation as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier electronically with the Commission in accordance with the guidance letter sent to the Electric Cooperatives of Mississippi by Ms. Katherine Collier, Executive Director, Acting General Counsel, on December 21, 2020, and that, in filing the Application, I have complied with the service requirements of the Commission's Eligible Telecommunications Carrier Checklist ("ETC Checklist").

I, Lawrence E. Hahn, do also certify in accordance with Section I.C.1. of the ETC Checklist that I have, as an attorney for Applicant, caused to be served concurrently with the filing of this Application, by United States Mail, postage pre-paid, a Notice of the Application, in substantially the same form as included in Exhibit C of this Application, to eligible telecommunications carriers and incumbent local exchange carriers in the State of Mississippi, as listed in Exhibit C, in satisfaction of the Commission's requirements.

This, the 6th day of January, 2021

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Lawrence E. Hahn, MSB No. 8954 McNeese & Hahn, PLLC 338 Church Street P.O. Drawer 948 Columbia, MS 39429 E-mail: lhahn@mcneesehahn.com Mississippi State Bar No. 8954

# EXHIBIT A2

# LIST OF CENSUS BLOCKS IN WHICH APPLICANT SEEKS DESIGNATION SOLELY AS A LOW-INCOME (LIFELINE) ELIGIBLE TELECOMMUNICATIONS CARRIER

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\*\*MPSC Electronic Copy \*\* 2021-UA-14 Filed on 04/06/2021 \*\*

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280730206001013	280730206002014	280779601002026	280919501002028
280730206001015	280730206002015	280779601002028	280919501002032
280730206001016	280730206002017	280779601002031	280919501002044
280730206001018	280730206002019	2807796010020 <b>32</b>	280919501002052
280730206001019	280730206002020	280779601002033	280919501003045
280730206001022	280730206002021	280779601002034	280919501003049
280730206001023	280730206002023	280779601002035	280919501003055
280730206001024	280730206002026	280779601002036	280919501003073
280730206001025	280730206002031	280779601002037	280919501003083
280730206001026	280730206002032	280779601002040	280919501003095
280730206001030	280730206003010	280779601004036	280919501004023
280730206001032	280730206003011	280779603003007	280919501004032
280730206001034	280730206003012	280779603003008	280919501004034
280730206001035	280730206003017	280779603003016	280919501004036
280730206001036	280730206003020	280779603003017	280919501004045
280730206001037	280730206003021	280779603003025	280919501004047
280730206001040	280730206003023	280779603003035	280919501004048
280730206001041	280730206003024	280779603003036	280919501004054
280730206001042	280730206003025	280779603003037	280919501004058
280730206001044	280730206003031	280779603003039	280919501004059
280730206001045	280730206003034	280779603003040	280919501004061
280730206001087	280730206003035	280779603003041	280919501004064
280730206001088	280730206003057	280779603003043	280919501004065

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280919501004070	280919502002062	280919504003085	280919505002043
280919501004073	280919502002064	280919504003087	280919505002044
280919501004074	280919502002074	280919504003088	280919505002045
280919501004079	280919502002076	280919504004073	280919505002046
280919501004080	280919502002081	280919504004080	280919505002047
280919501004082	280919502002086	280919505001000	280919505002048
280919501005005	280919502002088	280919505001001	280919505002049
280919501005037	280919502002094	280919505001002	280919505002050
280919501005038	280919502002095	280919505001003	280919505002051
280919501005057	280919503001001	280919505001004	280919505002052
280919501005061	280919503001002	280919505001005	280919505002053
280919501005063	280919503001003	280919505001006	280919505002055
280919501005064	280919503001005	280919505001007	280919505002056
280919501005068	280919503001006	280919505001018	280919505002057
280919501005072	280919503001007	280919505001019	280919505002058
280919501005073	280919503001009	280919505001023	280919505002061
280919501005074	280919503002007	280919505001028	280919505002066
280919501005079	280919503003000	280919505001029	280919505002068
280919501005080	280919503003001	280919505001031	280919505002070
280919501005081	280919503003002	280919505001035	280919505002072
280919501005082	280919503003019	280919505001042	280919505002073
280919501005084	280919504001000	280919505001086	280919505002074
280919501005085	280919504001007	280919505002000	280919505002075
280919501005090	280919504001009	280919505002001	280919505002076
280919502001013	280919504001010	280919505002002	280919505002077
280919502001017	280919504001013	280919505002003	280919505002078
280919502001018	280919504001014	280919505002005	280919505002080
280919502001022	280919504001015	280919505002006	280919505002081
280919502001034	280919504001016	280919505002007	280919505002082
280919502001035	280919504001017	280919505002008	280919505002086
280919502001036	280919504001018	280919505002010	280919505002087
280919502001039	280919504001021	280919505002011	280919505002088
280919502001041	280919504001037	280919505002012	280919505003014
280919502001050	280919504001038	280919505002014	280919505003033
280919502001088	280919504002000	280919505002015	280919505003041
280919502001089	280919504002001	280919505002026	280919505003045
280919502001093	280919504002003	280919505002033	280919505003046
280919502001094	280919504002005	280919505002034	280919505003047
280919502001105	280919504002009	280919505002038	280919506001002
280919502002032	280919504003074	280919505002039	280919506001003
280919502002045	280919504003080	280919505002041	280919506001004
280919502002060	280919504003084	280919505002042	280919506001007

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280919506001013	281099501001047	281099501004002	281119502002123
280919506001018	281099501001049	281099501004003	281119502002124
280919506001028	281099501001055	281099501004004	281119502002128
280919506001034	281099501001057	281099501004011	281119502002132
280919506001037	281099501001062	281099501004012	281119502002133
280919506001041	281099501001071	281099501004014	281119502002138
280919506001051	281099501001073	281099501004016	281119502002162
280919506001053	281099501001082	281099501004017	281119502002169
280919506001054	281099501001120	281099501004019	281119502002170
280919506001055	281099501001127	281099501004020	281119502002208
280919506001056	281099501001142	281099501004021	281119502002209
280919506002000	281099501001150	281099501004022	281119502002210
280919506002001	281099501001159	281099501004024	281119502002211
280919506002002	281099501001164	281099501004026	281119502002212
280919506002005	281099501001170	281099501004027	281119502002213
280919506002009	281099501001174	281099501004029	281119502002216
280919506002010	281099501001180	281099501004030	281119502002218
280919506002015	281099501001184	281099501004031	281119502002219
280919506002017	281099501003012	281099501004033	281119502002220
280919506002018	281099501003013	281099501004034	281119502002223
280919506002019	281099501003014	281099501004035	281119502002224
280919506002020	281099501003019	281099501004036	281119502002225
280919506002023	281099501003020	281099501004037	281119502002226
280919506002032	281099501003030	281099501004043	281119502002227
280919506002035	281099501003032	281099501004063	281119502002228
280919506002039	281099501003035	281099502002000	281119502002231
280919506003004	281099501003036	281099502002001	281119502002232
280919506003012	281099501003038	281099502002002	281119502002233
280919506003017	281099501003045	281099502002004	281119502002234
280919506003018	281099501003051	281099502002005	281119502002235
280919506003021	281099501003052	281099502002008	281119502002236
280919506003022	281099501003054	281099502002009	281119502002239
280919506003025	281099501003055	281099502002012	281119502002241
280919506003027	281099501003063	281099502002094	281119502002242
280919506003043	281099501003086	281099502002095	281119502002247
280919506003048	281099501003087	281099502002097	281119502002248
280919506004004	281099501003088	281099502002099	281119502002249
280919505004007	281099501003092	281099502003000	281119502002250
280919506004021	281099501003093	281099502003001	281119502002252
280919506004025	281099501003094	281099502003002	281119502002253
281099501001032	281099501004000	281099502003004	281119502002254
281099501001045	281099501004001	281099502003006	281119502002255

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281119502002256	281310201001015	281310202011136	281310202012061
281119502002257	281310201001027	281310202011137	281310202012069
281119502002260	281310201001103	281310202011139	281310202012084
281119502002262	281310201002027	281310202011140	281310202012085
281119502002264	281310201002035	281310202011141	281310202012087
281119502002265	281310201002037	281310202011149	281310202012091
281119502002272	281310201002055	281310202011150	281310202012096
281119502002273	281310201002058	281310202011152	281310202012098
281119502002274	281310201002059	281310202011154	281310202012109
281119502002276	281310201003041	281310202011158	281310202012110
281119502002287	281310201003050	281310202011160	281310202012111
281119502002288	281310201003051	281310202011161	281310202012117
281119502002289	281310201003052	281310202011163	281310202012118
281119502002291	281310201003059	281310202011164	281310202012121
281119502002293	281310201003060	281310202011166	281310202012123
281119502002295	281310201003064	281310202011167	281310202012128
281119502002300	281310201003066	281310202011169	281310202012132
281119502002302	281310201003067	281310202011170	281310202012133
281119502002305	281310202011012	281310202012003	281310202012137
281119502002306	281310202011016	281310202012004	281310202012149
281119502002307	281310202011021	281310202012007	281310202012151
281119502002310	281310202011025	281310202012011	281310202012154
281119502002311	281310202011026	281310202012012	281310202012161
281119502002312	281310202011032	281310202012014	281310202012172
281119502002317	281310202011063	281310202012015	281310202012182
281119502002318	281310202011067	281310202012017	281310202012183
281119502002321	281310202011068	281310202012018	281310202012190
281119502002323	281310202011070	281310202012023	281310202012191
281119502002324	281310202011081	281310202012025	281310202012195
281119502002326	281310202011084	281310202012026	281310202012208
281119502002327	281310202011086	281310202012027	281310202012209
281119502002329	281310202011088	281310202012030	281310202012213
281119502002331	281310202011089	281310202012032	281310202012218
281119502002333	281310202011096	281310202012033	281310202012227
281119502002334	281310202011099	281310202012034	281310202012230
281119502002335	281310202011105	281310202012035	281310202012231
281119502002337	281310202011110	281310202012036	281310202012238
281119502002339	281310202011125	281310202012038	281310202012240
281119502002340	281310202011128	281310202012044	281310202012255 281310202012257
281119502002341	281310202011129	281310202012047	281310202012257
281119502002351	281310202011131	281310202012057	281310202013017
281310201001005	281310202011133	281310202012058	1 201210202012012

281310202013020	281310202021066	281310202022028	281310202023063
281310202013023	281310202021068	281310202022031	281310202023075
281310202013025	281310202021071	281310202022034	281310202023078
281310202013026	281310202021073	281310202022035	281310202023080
281310202013027	281310202021074	281310202022036	281310202023082
281310202013031	281310202021075	281310202022044	281310202023086
281310202013032	281310202021078	281310202022050	281310202023088
281310202013040	281310202021080	281310202022051	281310202023089
281310202013041	281310202021081	281310202022053	281310202023090
281310202013043	281310202021082	281310202022054	281310202023091
281310202013044	281310202021083	281310202022055	281310202023092
281310202013046	281310202021085	281310202022058	281310202023097
281310202013049	281310202021086	281310202022059	281310202023104
281310202013051	281310202021093	281310202022063	281310202023106
281310202013065	281310202021094	281310202022074	281310202023108
281310202013074	281310202021096	281310202022075	281310202023109
281310202013075	281310202021101	281310202022077	281310202023110
281310202013078	281310202021103	281310202022083	281310202023111
281310202013079	281310202021107	281310202022084	281310202023113
281310202013080	281310202021129	281310202022087	281310202023115
281310202013082	281310202021135	281310202022104	281310202023116
281310202013083	281310202021140	281310202022115	281310202023117
281310202013094	281310202021156	281310202022125	281310202023118
281310202013100	281310202021189	281310202022132	281310202023119
2813102020131 <b>02</b>	281310202021222	281310202022140	281310202023121
281310202013103	281310202021233	281310202023000	281310202023122
281310202013104	281310202021239	281310202023009	281310202023123
281310202013105	281310202021250	281310202023014	281310202023125
281310202013106	281310202021269	281310202023017	281310202023126
281310202013115	281310202022003	281310202023018	281479501001000
281310202021018	281310202022005	281310202023019	281479501001001
281310202021020	281310202022006	281310202023020	281479501001003
281310202021024	281310202022007	281310202023023	281479501001033
281310202021025	281310202022008	281310202023024	281479501001043
281310202021032	281310202022009	281310202023038	281479501001049
281310202021035	281310202022013	281310202023046	281479501001064
281310202021043	281310202022014	281310202023053	281479501001065
281310202021046	281310202022015	281310202023055	281479501001067
281310202021048	281310202022017	281310202023056	281479501001068
281310202021060	281310202022019	281310202023057	281479501006015
281310202021063	281310202022024	281310202023058	281479501006016
281310202021065	281310202022027	281310202023062	281479501006017

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