

STATE OF NORTH DAKOTA

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

**Red River Rural Telephone Association
Wahpeton Exchange
Public Convenience & Necessity**

Case No. PU-25-185

**Red River Rural Telephone Association
Designated Eligible Carrier
Application**

Case No. PU-25-190

ORDER

October 9, 2025

Preliminary Statement

On May 12, 2025, Red River Rural Telephone Association (Red River) filed an application requesting authorization to provide local exchange telecommunications services as the incumbent local exchange carrier (ILEC) in the area currently known as the Wahpeton exchange in North Dakota. The Wahpeton exchange is currently served by CenturyLink Communications, LLC (CenturyLink) as the ILEC, Case No. PU-25-185.

Also on May 12, 2025, Red River filed an application requesting that Red River be designated as an essential telecommunications carrier (ETC) in the Wahpeton exchange area, Case No. PU-25-190.

On June 4, 2025, the Commission issued a Notice of Opportunity for Consolidated Hearing (Notice) that provided until July 18, 2025, for comments and requests for hearing. CenturyLink filed comments on the proceeding but did not request a hearing. The Notice stated that, if deemed appropriate, the Commission can determine the matters without a hearing.

The Notice identified the issues to be considered in Case No. PU-25-185 are:

1. Fitness and ability of Red River to provide local exchange telecommunications services.
2. Adequacy of Red River's proposed telecommunications services.
3. Technical, financial and managerial ability of Red River to provide telecommunications services.

4. Whether, upon granting a certificate of public convenience and necessity to Red River to provide local exchange telecommunication services in the area currently known as the Wahpeton exchange, CenturyLink's certificate of public convenience and necessity should be relinquished or transferred to competitive local exchange service?

The Notice identified the issues to be considered in Case No. PU-25-190 are:

1. Qualification of the applicant under the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Section 214(e) for designation as an ETC eligible to receive federal universal service funding.
2. The ETC universal service support area to be designated.
3. Whether it is in the public interest to designate Red River as an ETC in the Wahpeton local exchange area for the purposes of receiving universal service support?
4. Whether, upon designation of Red River as an ETC for the Wahpeton exchange, CenturyLink's designation as an ETC for the Wahpeton exchange should be relinquished or transferred to competitive local exchange service?

On July 18, 2025, CenturyLink filed comments on Red River's applications.

Also on July 18, 2025, Red River filed supplemental information.

On September 25, 2025, the Commission discussed the applications with Red River during an Informal Hearing.

Discussion

Red River is a foreign Cooperative Association authorized to do business in North Dakota. It has principal offices at 510 Broadway, Abercrombie, North Dakota 58001.

In support of the applications, Red River provided an affidavit of Thomas Steinolfson, CEO of Red River.

CenturyLink is a foreign Corporation authorized to do business in North Dakota. It has principal offices at 100 CenturyLink Drive, Monroe, Louisiana 71203.

Public Convenience and Necessity

Red River holds certificates of public convenience and necessity to provide local exchange telecommunications services inside eight telephone exchanges in North Dakota.

Red River testified during the Informal Hearing that it has completed 98.5% of its fiber to the home network in the Wahpeton exchange and plans to have the remainder completed by the end of the 2025 construction season with its own fiber optic network similar to the other referenced exchanges that it currently operates as the ILEC within.

Red River's applications state that they currently provide service to approximately 424 wireline subscribers and 736 broadband subscribers in the Wahpeton exchange.

CenturyLink's comments assert that it provided service to 228 voice customers at the end of 2024.

Red River testified that it maintains an office in Wahpeton, North Dakota, staffed 8am to 4pm Monday through Friday and a 24/7 help desk line.

The Commission finds that Red River is fit and able to provide telecommunications services to the customers served in the Wahpeton telephone exchange geographic area.

The Commission finds that the telecommunications services offered by Red River in the geographic area currently known as the Wahpeton exchange is adequate.

The Commission finds that Red River has the technical, financial and managerial ability to provide telecommunications service to the geographic area currently known as the Wahpeton exchange.

Red River will provide telecommunications service to the geographic area currently known as the Wahpeton exchange as an ILEC.

Red River occupies a market position comparable to a legacy ILEC. Red River has substantially replaced the legacy ILEC. The reclassification serves the public interest, convenience, and necessity and the purposes of 47 USCA section 251.

During the Informal Hearing, Red River provided testimony and visual aids that highlighted CenturyLink's lack of maintenance of its existing system in the Wahpeton exchange, and its failure to extend service to areas of customer growth.

CenturyLink filed comments with the Commission supportive of the application, but requested that it continue to be able to serve its customers in the Wahpeton exchange.

The Commission does not find it necessary to relinquish, but does find it appropriate to transfer to a competitive local exchange carrier (CLEC) CenturyLink's certificate of public convenience and necessity for the Wahpeton exchange.

Designation as an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier

Red River is designated as an ETC for the purpose of receiving federal universal service support in a study area that encompasses eight North Dakota telephone exchanges.

The federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 (Act) provides for financial support to a common carrier that (1) offers the services established by the FCC to be supported by federal universal service support mechanisms either using its own facilities or a combination of its own facilities and resale of another carrier's services; (2) advertises the availability of such services and the charges for such services using media of general distribution; and (3) is designated as an ETC. An ETC must use that financial support only for the provision, maintenance, and upgrading of facilities and services for which the support is intended.

To be designated as an ETC, the carrier must (1) under Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 47 Subpart B, offer to telecommunications customers each of the services and functionalities designated for federal universal service support; and (2) under CFR Part 47 § 54.405, make available Lifeline service to qualifying low-income consumers.

For telecommunications customers, the services designated by the FCC for support by universal service support mechanisms include 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, lifeline support and toll limitation services to qualifying low-income consumers.

The affidavit of Thomas Steinolfson, Red River, affirms that it will continue to meet the obligations of an ETC in the Wahpeton exchange. Red River also affirms that no waiver of ETC criteria is requested.

The Commission finds Red River's application for designation as an eligible telecommunications carrier under North Dakota Administrative Code section 69-09-05-12 is complete including the required affirmations and certifications.

The Commission finds Red River is qualified under Section 214(e) of the federal Communications Act of 1934 as amended by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, for designation as an eligible telecommunications carrier for receiving federal universal service funding for the proposed designated service areas.

For purposes of federal universal service funding, the designated expanded service area for Red River is a rural study area.

Based on the evidence in this proceeding, Red River is qualified under the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Section 214(e) for designation as an ETC to receive

federal universal service funding and it is in the public interest that Red River be designated as an ETC in the requested designated expanded service area.

Based on the evidence in this proceeding the Commission finds it is in the public interest that the Wahpeton exchanges shall be included within Red River's rural study area for the purposes of federal universal service support and therefore be removed from CenturyLink's study area.

The Commission finds that it is in the public interest that CenturyLink will remain as an ETC in the Wahpeton exchange.

Order

The Commission Orders:

1. Red River Rural Telephone Association's application for a certificate of public convenience and necessity to provide incumbent local exchange telecommunications services in the area currently known as the Wahpeton exchange in North Dakota is approved.
2. Red River Rural Telephone Association is issued Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity Number 6013 to provide local exchange telecommunications services inside the Wahpeton, North Dakota exchange.
3. CenturyLink Communications, LLC's Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity for the area currently known as the Wahpeton exchange in North Dakota is transferred to competitive local exchange telecommunications service.
4. The Wahpeton exchange area is hereby relinquished from CenturyLink Communication LLC's study area.
5. The Wahpeton exchange area is added to Red River Rural Telephone Association's rural study area.
6. Red River Rural Telephone Association's request for designation as an eligible telecommunications carrier in the Wahpeton exchange is granted.

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION


Sheri Haugen-Hoffart
Commissioner


Randy Christmann
Chair


Jill Kringstad
Commissioner

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

STATE OF NORTH DAKOTA

Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity

Certificate Number 6013

This is to certify that public convenience and necessity require, and permission is granted for Red River Rural Telephone Association, to provide local exchange telecommunications services inside the Wahpeton, North Dakota local exchange area.

This certificate was issued in Case No. PU-25-185, and is conditioned upon Red River Rural Telephone Association securing the franchise or other authority of the proper municipal or other public authority for the exercise of these rights and privileges.

Bismarck, North Dakota, October 9, 2025.

ATTEST:

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION


Executive Secretary


Commissioner