

United States Senate

July 11, 2023

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U.S. SENATE CLIMATE CHANGE TASK FORCE

Jonathan Spalter
President and Chief Executive Officer
USTelecom
601 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Suite 600
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Mr. Spalter:

I write with concern over reporting by the Wall Street Journal that members of USTelecom have ignored the perils posed by their legacy infrastructure — specifically, old, lead-sheathed telephone lines — and have potentially put at risk the health and well-being of Americans across the country. The telecommunications companies responsible for these phone lines must act swiftly and responsibly to ensure the mitigation of any environmental and public health effects.

According to the Wall Street Journal’s investigation, “AT&T, Verizon and other telecom giants have left behind a sprawling network of cables covered in toxic lead that stretches across the U.S., under the water, in the soil and on poles overhead . . . As the lead degrades, it is ending up in places where Americans live, work and play.”¹ The investigation found that “[l]ead levels in sediment and soil at more than four dozen locations tested by the Journal exceeded safety recommendations set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.”² Lead exposure poses serious risks to children, who are particularly vulnerable to its toxic effects, and is associated with chronic pain in adults, and with miscarriage, stillbirth or premature birth during pregnancy.

It was especially concerning to me that the Journal reported: “For many years, telecom companies have known about the lead-covered cables and the potential risks of exposure to their workers, according to documents and interviews with former employees. They were also aware that lead was potentially leaching into the environment, but haven’t meaningfully acted on

¹ Susan Pulliam et al., *America is Wrapped in Miles of Toxic Lead Cables*, WALL ST. J. (July 9, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/lead-cables-telecoms-att-toxic-5b34408b>.

² *Id.*

potential health risks to the surrounding communities or made efforts to monitor the cables.”³
This is corporate irresponsibility of the worst kind.

According to the Journal, “[t]he companies and an industry group representing them said they would work together to address any concerns related to lead-sheathed cables,” and a spokeswoman for USTelecom said that “[t]he U.S. telecommunications industry stands ready to engage constructively on this issue.”⁴ To that end, please respond in writing to the following questions by July 25, 2023:

1. Do the companies know the locations and mileage of lead-sheathed cables that they own or for which they are responsible — whether aerial, underwater, or underground? Are there maps of the locations and installations? If not, what plans do the companies have to identify the cables?
2. Why have the companies that knew about the cables — and the potential exposure risks they pose — failed to monitor them or act?
3. What plans do the companies have to address the environmental and public health issues posed by the cables? Specifically, will the companies commit to:
 - a. testing for soil, water, and other contamination caused by the cables?
 - b. remediating any contamination?
 - c. warning communities of the potential hazards the cables pose?
 - d. guaranteeing medical treatment and compensation to anyone harmed by lead poisoning caused by the cables?

The members of USTelecom that are responsible for these lead-sheathed cables have a duty — both civic and legal — to ensure that they do not put Americans in harm’s way. I will be awaiting answers to my questions, expecting further action and commitments from USTelecom’s members, and watching closely from my seats on Senate committees that have jurisdiction over the environmental and public health issues these cables present.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*