

Free Press Viewpoint

Moving right along, fix our phone bills

If Congress ever does anything except debate the budget, it needs to change the federal laws which allow unscrupulous scammers access to our phone bills.

Unauthorized charges cost Americans about \$2 billion a year, according to a study by the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-West Virginia), who is leading an effort to change the rules, says these "mystery fees" show up on landline phone bills through a process known as "cramming."

Cramming started after changes in the industry, and federal law, following the breakup of the Bell System monopoly. Sen. Rockefeller blames major phone companies like AT&T (the former Southwestern Bell, or SBC) for not cleaning up the problem.

"It's illegal, it's wrong, it's scamming," he asked at a recent hearing. "Why haven't you cleaned up your act?"

An industry spokesman claimed the companies had made progress, but acknowledged the problem continues.

Scammers get access to the billing system through small firms which supposedly offer some legitimate telecommunications service. They attach bogus bills to home and business accounts, and the phone companies claim they are obligated to include these in your monthly bills. Apparently, they make no effort to scrutinize these charges.

When an odd charge appears on a phone bill, the companies routinely tell people that it's their job to contact the firm making the claim. Services may be described as voicemail, directory service or web hosting, among others.

These firms usually will remove the charge, but it costs the consumer or business time and money to accomplish that. When the charge is small, some people just pay rather than challenge it. One expert described spending 15 hours to straighten out bills for a group of restaurants.

Whatever the case, when people pay, the scammers smile all the way to the bank.

The easy solution, rather than try to make this system work, would be to repeal the law which allows telecoms to piggyback their charges on landline bills. That'd save the big telcos money and save consumers from having to pay for this cumbersome and unworkable system.

Small firms would have to bill people on their own, but the legitimate need appears to be just the tail that wags this big, smelly ol' dog.

Right now, the effort to reform the billing system is bogged down in the general morass of delays in Congress, partisan infighting and the overall budget battle. What's needed, though, is not a reform, but an end to third-party billing on phone statements. It seems that most are bogus, anyway, so "reform" will accomplish nothing.

If you have received a bogus bill and think this system stinks, it's time to write our senators, Jerry Moran and Pat Roberts, and Rep. Tim Huelskamp and ask them to join with Democrats to end this travesty. — *Steve Haynes*

Write us

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It's a 'fair' garden that comes in late

The county fair comes too early every year. I'm never ready for it.

Each year, I think, 'Why not enter something in the open classes at the fair?'

"I'm a pretty good gardener, so why not show some of those tomatoes, green beans, corn, green peppers, cucumbers or cabbages that I grow every year?"

Well, there's one good reason. It's never ready.

When fair time rolls around each year, the peas, radishes, lettuce and spinach are all gone. The corn, carrots and cabbages are nowhere near ready to pick, and the squash, tomatoes, green peppers and cucumbers are just coming on.

If an entry was one yellow squash or one cucumber, I'd have a chance. But no, they want a selection. That I don't have.

I'd probably have enough tomatoes, except Steve keeps eating my entries.

In another month, mind you, I'll be leaving vegetables on strangers' doorsteps. But not yet. Not now. Not this week.

Speaking of gardens, I'm waging war against the grasshoppers again.

Now, mind you, I believe in organic gardening. I'm willing to share some produce with nature — not tomato horn worms — but the bugs can eat a few leaves and I won't complain too



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

much.

But those darned grasshoppers are treating my green beans like dessert. They don't ever eat a whole bean. They just take a bite out of each pod. That's sort of like the couple who go to dinner. He orders dessert and she just takes a bite.

I'd prefer the grasshoppers eat all of one bean instead of taking a bite out of every one in the patch, though.

Right now, I'm fighting bugs with bugs. I've done everything I can to encourage the spiders to take over my garden. The webs over my cabbage plants are incredibly beautiful. I hope to have some really nice cabbages this fall. Or I might have some really pretty cabbages full of itsy bitsy spiders.

Oh well, we'll see how this one turns out.

And, while on the subject of spiders. I saved one's life the other day.

I was on pharmacy duty in Norton when

the tech let out a little yelp and pointed out a large wolf spider hiding under a counter. The inside of a pharmacy is no place for a spider of any kind, and their life span tends to be very short once the girls discover them.

So, I got a plastic container and shoed the spider into it. I then coaxed a manager to let me out the back door. I crossed the parking lot and tenderly let the spider go in the grass. The manager's look told me that she thought I had lost my mind. The tech was relieved and the spider was just glad to be out of there.

Steve did a little traffic control the other night as well. As I was driving up to the garage, he noted that Toadaly, our pet toad, was out in the middle of the driveway.

Steve got out of the car and herded the annoyed toad, who was finding great pickings out there under the lights, back to his usual spot by the bushes.

Come to think of it, Toadaly is beginning to remind me of Jabba the Hut.

Ah, well. It's summertime, and nature is taking over. Don't ya love it?

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkansas.com

Get regulation under regulation

Throughout the debate over raising the country's debt limit, people on both sides of the issue talked about the economic impact of raising the "credit-card" limit, and how job creation would be affected based on the size of cuts and caps.

After all, whatever Washington spends and borrows is money taken out of the hands of consumers and businesses that otherwise keep the economy humming and prosperity growing. But there is a third component that cannot be neglected in efforts to spur job creation: the need to reduce regulation.

Besides getting spending and borrowing under control, the future of our economy depends on getting our regulatory system in check. America cannot afford an expanded and excessive regulatory scheme concocted by bureaucrats who have never met a payroll in their entire lives.

Rules on employers are sold to the American people as well-intentioned, but they often end up being expensive and time-consuming for employers simply trying to pursue the American Dream. This administration has bound employers so tightly with that red tape that they are choking their abilities to create jobs. Most of the bureaucrats writing and enforcing these regulations have no idea of the consequences,



U.S. Rep. Tim Huelskamp

• Capitol Notes

and if they do, they apparently do not care.

In western Kansas, we are all too familiar with the devastating effects of the Environmental Protection Agency. Last week, the House considered the annual appropriations for the Department of Interior, which includes Environmental Protection. The underlying bill contained a 17 percent reduction for the agency, but I believed it did not go far enough and offered an amendment to reduce it even more.

Unfortunately, not everyone agreed with me, but not everyone has witnessed the same type of assault on their districts as I have seen. Washington bureaucrats at this agency have declared open season on agriculture and energy — two of Kansas' major industries.

In addition to reducing the agency's budget overall, this appropriations bill seeks to prohibit the agency from imposing unwarranted, unnecessary and duplicative regulations on

farmers.

Given that many bureaucrats have never stepped on a farm — let alone been to Kansas — it is easy to explain why they have no idea that their regulations would drive farmers out of business. Regulating dust? Are they serious? Wind is as common as oxygen on Kansas farms; the agency probably would prefer we just halt operations on days the wind blows.

But perhaps one of the greatest offenses by this agency is its war against Sunflower Electric's proposed expansion in Holcomb. There, the agency is unnecessarily delaying and complicating the permitting process for the coal-fired plant. While the president pontificates about needing jobs in America, nearly 1,900 construction and 300 permanent jobs remain uncreated and Kansas' economy is deprived of millions of dollars in economic activity.

Loosening the regulatory grip of the Environmental Protection Agency on America's job creators is the next logical step for Washington to take in its efforts to restore in American employers the confidence they need to create jobs and pursue prosperity.

Tim Huelskamp is the congressman from Kansas' 1st District, serving his first term.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

