

Digital TV is Coming!

But is the Government wasting taxpayer money and creating confusion?

Congress passed a law that requires the nation's 1,750 full power TV stations to shut down analog broadcasting by February 17, 2009, and broadcast only digital signals after that. Digital TV promises better pictures and more efficient spectrum usage, and it will free up spectrum that can be auctioned to reduce the national debt.

But 7,300 Class A, Lower TV, and TV Translator stations are not subject to the deadline. The FCC will not start a rule making to transition these stations to digital until later this year, and the process will surely take until 2013 or later to finish.

The Government Is Helping Cushion the Cost of the Transition.

TV Translators and Low Power TV stations that rebroadcast full power TV stations will need to receive digital signals and convert them to analog when the full power stations go digital-only. Congress appropriated funds to help these stations to buy professional grade converters. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in the Department of Commerce will make grants of up to \$1,000 per station, limited to small, rural communities.

For consumers who don't have digital TV sets, NTIA will also distribute millions of coupons for a \$40 discount on the price of a home converter to allow digital signals to be watched on an older analog TV set. The program started January 1, 2008, and more than one million coupons were requested in the first few days.

But wait! Some of the Home Converter Boxes Won't Work for Some Viewers!

When NTIA specified the qualifications that a home converter box must meet to allow the \$40 discount coupon to be used, it didn't require the boxes to pass through analog signals from Class A, Low Power TV, and TV Translator stations, even though those stations operate three-quarters of the nation's transmitters. Some of the boxes that manufacturers are planning to offer also won't pass through any of the analog full power signals that will still be on the air in 2008. <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/lptv/index.html>

So what will happen? A consumer will buy a converter box and hook it up to his or her analog TV set. If it is one of the models that won't pass through analog signals, then the viewer will be able to see **ONLY** digital stations. All of the analog stations still on the air will be blocked! Consumers won't understand the problem, let alone know how to find out if the converter box model they see in the store will pass through analog signals or not.

Who Will Lose? Everyone!

For all of 2008, almost all TV stations will be on the air in analog, but consumers with the wrong boxes will be able to view only digital signals, assuming they have good digital reception. And even after 2009, many of the new Hispanic networks and other minority channels, as well as smaller local TV stations, will still be analog; so minority viewers and small businesses will bear the brunt of the problem.

Manufacturers, retailers, and the Government will also lose! If consumers can't see the stations they want after they hook up converter boxes, they will bring the boxes back to where they bought them. Retailers will have to take the boxes back and give refunds, and most will make the manufacturers take them back. Experience has shown that most sales people won't have enough expertise to help the consumer solve the problem. Meanwhile, the NTIA coupons will have been cashed, so the Government's money will go down the drain -- paid out with no benefit to the consumer.

Boxes that Don't Deliver Analog Signals are Illegal!

Back in 1962, Congress passed the All-Channel Receiver Act, 47 USC Sec. 303(s), requiring all TV reception devices to receive all channels. The FCC cited that law when it required all new TV sets to have digital tuners. But NTIA ignored the same law when it allowed converter boxes, which are clearly subject to the law the same way that VCRs are, to block analog signals. These boxes don't receive "all" channels, so they are illegal.

On December 7, 2007, the Community Broadcasters Association filed a petition asking the FCC to issue a declaratory ruling that digital converter boxes that block analog signals from reaching a TV receiver violate the All-Channel Receiver Act. The FCC is still considering the petition.

Converter box coupons will be delivered to consumers in only another month or two, and the boxes will go on sale in retail stores at the same time. The FCC must act promptly to avoid consumer confusion and waste. If the FCC does not stop noncompliant converter boxes before they reach the retail market, consumers will buy the boxes, find out that they have lost access to some TV stations, and lose faith in the boxes and the NTIA coupon program. Boxes will be returned, retailers and manufacturers will lose money, and the Government's subsidy money will also be lost.

Adequate laws and regulations are already in place, but the FCC must deal with the problem before the public pays the price for the mistake made by NTIA and some manufacturers.

Tell the FCC not to delay! A short time fuse is burning. The time to act is now!