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Copps: FCC Mulling DTV Test Markets

By *Ted Hearn* -- *Multichannel News*, 12/31/2007 1:31:00 PM

Washington – The Federal Communications Commission is considering whether to conduct the digital TV transition in a few test markets before the national cutoff of analog TV on Feb. 17, 2009, FCC Democrat Michael Copps said in a statement Monday.

“I recognize there may be legal, technical, and practical challenges with planning and conducting such a test this close to the national transition date. But I believe it can be done,” Copps said, without suggesting any times, dates, and locations.

Under a 2006 law, all 1,756 full-power TV stations are to halt analog service abruptly on Feb. 17, 2009. A handful of stations in various markets have made the transition but only with FCC approval. The agency has been willing to allow a station to surrender its analog license if the station’s over the air audience was negligible.

Many fear that millions of consumers -- especially broadcast-only homes – are going to react with anger if their TVs don’t function on Feb. 18, 2009. Copps has been predicting doom for many months, mainly because he believes the U.S. government hasn’t invested enough money in consumer education. The cable industry has launched a \$200 million consumer education program, and TV stations have a similar \$691 million effort.

“Pulling the switch on stations all across the land at one and the same time in February 2009 is going to be a real throw of the dice. It is unfathomable to me that we are planning to turn off every analog signal in the country on a single day without running at least one test market first,” Copps said.

Copps said that FCC chairman Kevin Martin and unnamed “colleagues” have agreed “to sit down now and begin exploring the idea of one or more DTV demonstration projects” in several markets.

But the idea of giving the DTV transition a dry run in a few test markets could prove controversial with some powerful forces.

Google and other participants in the FCC’s 700 MHz auction – which involves the sale of analog airwaves that TV stations are returning – could protest that the test results might delay the DTV transition after they had deposited at least \$10 billion with the U.S. The auction starts Jan. 24, 2008, a little more than three weeks.

First responders and their allies in Congress are eager to use the old analog TV spectrum on a national wireless broadband network, a need recommended by the 9/11 Commission.

Congress included \$1.5 billion to subsidize consumer purchase of digital-to-analog converter boxes, which will allow analog TVs to display digital signals received directly over the air.

The Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is running the coupon program.

Starting Jan. 1, 2008, consumers may call 1-888-DTV-2009 to request up to two \$40 converter box coupons redeemable at 14,000 retail outlets. NTIA – which has money for 33.5 million coupons – will begin mailing coupons on Feb. 17, 2008.

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The thumbnail image shows a preview of the wallchart. It features the Multichannel logo at the top left, followed by the title '2007 U.S. ASIAN MARKET OVERVIEW'. Below the title is the subtitle 'ASIAN HOUSEHOLD MEDIA AND TELEVISION'. The chart includes a bar graph with three bars, a pie chart, and a table of data.