

## FCC Broadband Plan Moves at Dial-Up Speed

One year after the [Federal Communications Commission](#) released its National Broadband Plan, more than half of the recommendations have yet to be implemented as the legacy of FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski — as well as the success of President Barack Obama’s broadband promises — hangs in the balance.

The 300-page plan’s bold vision for the nation’s broadband agenda has largely taken a backseat to the [net neutrality debate](#) at both the FCC and on Capitol Hill. Some 40 percent of the plan’s 218 recommendations are in progress, the Benton Foundation estimates, and nearly 10 percent of the recommendations have been completed. Thirty-four percent of the recommendations have not yet been touched.

Among the goals not completed:

- An ambitious goal to create a nationwide public safety network so first responders can communicate more effectively
- Reform an \$8 billion fund to subsidize the expansion of broadband services in rural, low-income and hard to reach areas
- Establish a standard for a universal device to deliver all sorts of TV content through the Internet

To be clear, not all of the recommendations outlined in the plan could be acted on solely by the FCC. Some require legislation from Congress and others are directed to separate federal agencies. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration, an arm of the Commerce Department that advises the President, shares or owns responsibility for much of the plan’s agenda.

But the scrutiny has been especially pointed this year, as debate over net neutrality has prompted some Republicans to question the agency’s authority over the Internet writ large. That’s meant there has been less time to focus on other elements of the [broadband](#) plan, many of which are not controversial, from moving ahead at the agency and on Capitol Hill.

“While the National Broadband Plan contained many good ideas, the energy needed to move its elements got sucked into the political vortex of the net neutrality crusade,” said Bruce Mehlman, co-chairman of the Internet Innovation Alliance. “Hopefully issues such as USF reform and increasing broadband spectrum can escape the ongoing ideological warfare over the unneeded net neutrality regulations.”

At the direction of Congress, the FCC spent nearly a year and \$20 million putting the lengthy plan together. Genachowski, who often talks about the importance of broadband — particularly mobile broadband — to the nation’s future, has repeatedly pointed to the National Broadband Plan as an agenda for his tenure at the agency.

Implementing the plan's recommendations will also be key to Obama's goals of expanding wireless broadband to 98 percent of Americans, which he announced to great fanfare during his State of the Union address.

"We're proud of what we've accomplished this past year," Genachowski said in a statement. "We're not going to rest until the U.S. is leading the world in broadband."

The FCC said it has acted on nearly 80 percent of the items on the plan's action agenda and hopes to increase that figure to 90 percent by July.

The FCC intends to implement the plan over the course of a decade. On some issues, including cybersecurity and privacy, the FCC has to work with other agencies or wait for direction from Congress before moving forward.

It counts among its accomplishments efforts to streamline the processes to build out wireless networks, ensuring accessibility to mobile devices for consumers with disabilities and bringing 911 calls to the digital age.

Other accomplishments include:

- Released unlicensed airwaves for "Super Wi-Fi" technologies to support mobile broadband
- Advanced the technical framework necessary to conduct voluntary incentive auctions of spectrum
- Modernized the E-Rate program to provide schools and libraries with improved Internet services

Those involved in the plan argue that it's not all about checking off boxes.

"I think people don't get what a plan is in a policy context," Blair Levin, principal author of the broadband plan, told POLITICO. "It's an agenda-clarifying device."

It's very rare for the White House to even have a telecommunications agenda, Levin noted.

"It is not simply about the speed of networks," Levin said. "It's about how we use broadband to solve our problems."

Speaking at the South By Southwest festival in Texas earlier this week, former FCC senior adviser Colin Crowell suggested that the plan transformed how the FCC operates.

“The process that developed the Plan was easily the most open, public, participatory process in the agency's history,” Crowell said in a speech, noting the exhaustive collection of public input the agency gathered through workshops, public comments and field hearings.

Democrats on the Hill largely hail the plan as a great starting point that got the nation's policy makers thinking about these key telecom issues.

Sen. Mark Warner, a key voice in the Senate on these issues, told POLITICO the plan is “a work in progress.”

“I think we have made good strides, but there's still more to do.”

Massachusetts Rep. Ed Markey, a senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, called the plan “inspirational and practical.”

“Without a specific broadband strategy and commitment to implementing it, we will fall farther behind other countries that already have made broadband a national priority,” he said in a statement. “If fully implemented, it will spark new investment, innovation and competition — the lifeblood of America's broadband policy.”

Republicans also applauded the plan's good intentions. But House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Fred Upton questioned whether there is a broadband deployment problem in the first place.

“With broadband available to 95 percent of households, 65 percent of adults subscribing and the number of residential users up to 200 million from 8 million just 10 years ago, we clearly don't have a deployment or adoption problem,” he said.

“The FCC is correct that the focus should be on reform of the wasteful Universal Service Fund,” he added. “We only wish that the broadband provisions of the stimulus package had focused on bringing broadband to unserved areas rather than funding broadband overbuilding.”

Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) said the plan “signifies the importance of making sure all Americans have access to broadband connections, but there is more work to be done.”

Goodlatte said the Obama administration and Congress need to work together to “continue developing policies that encourage investment and competition in broadband deployment.”

When asked about the plan's progress, industry insiders emphasize that the document itself remains a great accomplishment. But some are impatient about a lack of action in certain areas.

Gigi Sohn, president of the public interest group Public Knowledge, said the FCC is moving slower than she would prefer on important proceedings such as data roaming, special access and an effort to bring competition to the smart video box market.

“A lot of the success of the overall goal of the National Broadband Plan is relying on the FCC taking on those three tasks,” Sohn said, noting that they have the greatest potential to increase competition, lower prices and increase broadband adoption.

Sohn gave the commission credit for acting on items such as data collection and the spectrum dashboard but noted that while “functional and important,” those issues were “low-hanging fruit.”

Gary Shapiro, president of the Consumer Electronics Association, is “anxious” to see the FCC issue a notice of proposed rule making on the video box order “to realize benefits of device competition in the pay-TV service space.”

Shapiro applauded the commission for its forward-looking plan and also emphasized that Genachowski’s legacy hangs on his ability to deliver more spectrum to power the mobile broadband revolution.

The FCC told POLITICO that working to free up spectrum for mobile broadband and laying the groundwork for voluntary incentive auctions will be one of its top priorities this year.

The USF also needs attention, and the commission appears poised to give it. In a blog post Tuesday, all five FCC commissioners committed to producing an order on USF reform and Inter-Carrier Compensation by the end of the summer. These issues are considered to be among the most important area of reform by industry observers.

Tom Koutsky, who worked on the chapters about USF and Infrastructure Access, said “the proof is in the pudding over the next six to nine months.”

Koutsky, who now works for Connected Nation, expected it to take a year for the FCC to fill in all the specifics of the proposals. Genachowski’s legacy will be driven by what happens on net neutrality and whether significant aspects of the plan such as USF are put into place, he noted.