

Digital Television Transition: Issues Related to an Information Campaign Regarding the Transition

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Summary

The United States is currently undergoing a transition from analog to digital broadcast television. This transition offers the promise of more television programming options, interactive television, and high-definition television. An additional goal of the digital television (DTV) transition is for the federal government to reclaim radiofrequencies--or spectrum--that broadcasters currently use to transmit analog television signals. Because of the virtual explosion of wireless applications in recent years, there is considerable concern that future spectrum needs--both for commercial as well as government purposes--will not be met. The spectrum that will be cleared at the end of the DTV transition is considered to be highly valuable spectrum because of its particular technical properties. In all, the DTV transition will clear 108 megahertz (MHz) of spectrum, which is a fairly significant amount. In the 1997 Balanced Budget Act, the Congress directed the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to reallocate 24 MHz of the reclaimed spectrum to public safety uses. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been a greater sense of urgency to free spectrum for public safety purposes. The remaining returned spectrum will be auctioned for use in advanced wireless services, such as wireless high-speed Internet access. The return of the radiofrequency spectrum at the end of the transition will thus provide many benefits to society by easing the spectrum scarcity facing public safety first-responders, engendering economic growth and consumer value from spectrum redeployed to wireless services, and affording revenues to the federal government from the proceeds of a spectrum auction. Due to Congressional interest in the DTV transition, we testified before the House

Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, Committee on Energy and Commerce, on May 26, 2005; February 17, 2005; and July 21, 2004, and on issues related to the DTV transition. Additionally, Congress asked us to report on the information Americans need to know about the DTV transition. As such, this report specifically focuses on information campaign issues that we have not previously discussed. We are providing (1) stakeholder views on Americans' knowledge of the DTV transition, (2) stakeholder views on how government and industry might most effectively communicate critical DTV information, and (3) information on efforts by Germany and the United Kingdom to inform their citizens about the DTV transitions taking place in those countries.

In 2002, we reported that consumer knowledge about the DTV transition and its implications was low. In fact, a survey we conducted found that 83 percent of respondents had never heard of or were only somewhat aware of the transition. Therefore, in November 2002, we recommended that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) explore options to raise public awareness about the DTV transition and the impact it will have on the public. FCC developed a Web site (www.dtv.gov) to provide consumer information on the DTV transition. This Web site provides information about DTV news, terms, and regulatory information, as well as a listing of digital and high-definition television programming and a consumer's guide for digital television sets. Of the 35 stakeholders who responded to our question about the most effective mechanism to inform the public about the DTV transition, 22 believed that public service announcements, such as television advertisements, should be the primary form of communication. Some stakeholders believed that other approaches, such as newspapers, television guides, and the Internet, could be used to inform the public about the DTV transition. Stakeholders who responded to our question on which entity should be responsible for

implementing a public information campaign had differing opinions. Eleven stakeholders stated that broadcasters should be primarily responsible, 10 said that the government should have primary responsibility, and another 4 believed that all parties involved in the transition should play a role in educating the public on the DTV transition. A majority of stakeholders who responded to our question about the appropriate timing for a public information campaign believed that the campaign should start as soon as possible. Several of the stakeholders we spoke with noted that a prerequisite for an effective information campaign is certainty as to when the transition will actually take place. We found that Germany and the United Kingdom undertook extensive public information campaigns regarding their DTV transitions. As we reported in July 2004, the Berlin authorities and broadcasters provided considerable information to the public, the media, and retailers about what the transition would entail, what consumers needed to do, how they would benefit by transitioning to digital television, and where to get assistance if there was confusion about what equipment was necessary or if there were problems with equipment or reception. In preparation for their DTV transition, the United Kingdom (1) developed an action plan that identified a series of events that needed to occur to ensure the transition was completed and (2) formed various strategic groups charged with raising public awareness and knowledge of the DTV transition.