



Get ready to go digital

21 July 2009

The commercial launch of SA's digital television could be as soon as April. This is according to Karen Willenberg, M-Net regulatory director, speaking at the official launch of the Digital Dzonga today, at Constitutional Hill.

"We will be launching a commercial offering to South Africans with the tag line 'get ready to go digital,'" says Willenberg, who is also a council member of the Digital Dzonga Advisory Council.

Testing of the digital broadcasting format is under way at two sites in Gauteng, under the country's dual-illumination period.

The Dzonga is a group made up of consumers, government and other industry players, which is overseeing digital migration.

Willenberg says the Dzonga has been put in place to manage what will prove to be a complicated and costly process. About 9.1 million South African households with televisions will have to be migrated from analogue signal to digital.

"However, we have no doubt that the migration is the right thing to do because the benefits far outweigh the costs."

Funding available

Mashilo Boloka, director of broadcasting policy at the Department of Communications (DOC), says government has set aside funding to assist the existing broadcasters in the migration process. He did not quantify the amount.

He explains that government determined that a shorter dual-illumination period – compared to global timelines – would also help to keep costs down.

SA is in the midst of a three-year dual-illumination period that will lead up to a switchover from analogue broadcasting to a digital format. SA intends to turn off the analogue signal in 2011, ahead of the global deadline of 2015.

Government will also provide funding for the five million poorest households to assist them to buy a set-top box, which will allow them to watch digital TV.

Last year, Cabinet approved R2.45 billion for the subsidisation of the decoders to the poorest households, with the expectation that the final costs of the units would be between R400 and R700.

The subsidy strategy has not yet been made public. However, Boloka says a draft manufacturing strategy was finalised yesterday and is being made available for public comment by the department.

According to Boloka, no tender will be issued for the manufacturing of the subsidised set-top

boxes. Clarification on how the subsidies will work shall be made available at a later date.