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## **Conversion – A Path To Salvation For Analog LPTV/Class A/Translators?**

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Despite the years-long hype, the fact is that, when DTV Transition Day arrives next February, there will still be plenty of analog television signals available to the over-the-air viewing public. And it appears that, at long last, the powers-that-be may be taking that reality seriously and may be looking for ways to address it. But those efforts are arriving very late in the process.

The fantasy underlying Transition Day, of course, has been that we will all wake up on February 18, 2009, and find nothing but digital television service available over-the-air. And, true enough, the vast majority of full service over-the-air TV stations will be limited to digital at that point.

But TV Translator, Class A TV, and Low Power TV stations are *not* been subject to the same transition deadline as their full-service compadres, and the FCC has not made an effort to find digital channels for them. So as of now it is likely (if not 99.9% certain) that, on February 18, 2009, a very substantial number of those less-than-full-service licensees will still be plugging away in an analog world. Since there are some four times as many less-than-full-service TV stations (just over 7,000 in all) as full-service stations (fewer than 1,800), there will clearly be analog service widely available post-Transition.

But, you say, can't we be sure (despite the FCC's best efforts) that there will still be a boatload of analog TV receivers in general use? So the remaining analog operators will still have an audience, right?

Not so fast. The government has taken unrelenting steps to minimize the number of sets out there that receive only analog signals. For a couple of years already retailers have been required to sell sets with DTV tuners and, most recently, have been prohibited from selling analog-only sets. Extensive point-of-purchase notices have been required to educate consumers about the importance of buying DTV receivers.

And for those die-hards who are not planning to buy a new DTV receiver, the government has undertaken an extensive campaign to encourage the distribution of digital-to-analog converter boxes which will permit analog receivers to display programming transmitted digitally. Through a Congressionally-authorized-and-funded plan being implemented by NTIA, the government is underwriting \$40 of the total cost (approximately \$60-\$80) of converter boxes for anyone who wants one.

The problem is that virtually all the converter boxes that were available before the first round of government \$40 coupons expired did not include “pass-through” capability which would allow easy reception of analog signals. Instead, they completely blocked analog signals. In other words, once you plug your analog set into such a converter box, your set will display analog transmission *only* if you disconnect the converter box or install a by-pass wire around it. This would obviously present a disincentive to trying to watch analog programming. More recently, retailers have started to offer analog pass-through boxes, which still block analog signals while they are turned on but will allow analog signals to be viewed if the boxes are turned off and you put aside the converter box remote control and use your TV set remote control.

So if you’re a TV translator or analog Class A or LPTV station, you might be worried about what will happen come February 18. After all, if you are able to broadcast only analog signals, but the federal government has succeeded in convincing the over-the-air audience either to buy DTV receivers or install on their analog receivers converter boxes that effectively block analog signals, what’s going to happen to your audience?

A trade association (ably represented by FHH member Peter Tannenwald) representing a significant chunk of the LPTV/Class A industry felt compelled to go to court in March to seek an order requiring the FCC to take action to assure the availability of pass-through-capable converters. While the court declined to grant the requested relief, the filing of the lawsuit attracted much needed attention to the issue, which had been largely downplayed by the government up to that point.

It appears that the Feds may finally be getting the message that such stations – and their audiences – need some attention now in order to avoid disaster in February. The FCC has released three Fact Sheets providing detailed descriptions (complete with pictures!) of how to set up a converter box. One of these three Fact Sheets is specifically directed to viewers who intend to watch analog stations on analog receivers through a converter. And in June the Commission held a “consumer education workshop” focused solely on converter boxes. One interesting piece of information that came out during that workshop is that if you like to record programs from full service stations on your VCR, but you use a converter box, you won’t be able to set your VCR to record from more than one channel without returning to your TV set. The VCR will now have to remain tuned

to Channel 3 or 4, and the channel selection will have to be done in the converter box, which has no provision for programming to change channels automatically.

In the private sector, the NAB has been pushing for assurances that ample numbers of converters with analog pass-through capability will be available, particularly in the Wilmington, NC area which will serve as a test site for the transition in September.

An important point to remember is that if your analog TV set is hooked up to a cable or satellite service, you will have nothing to worry about, and you will not need a converter box (unless if you have extra sets not hooked up to your pay service). The FCC has ordered cable and satellite operators to take care of converting digital broadcast signals to analog until at least 2012, so your cable/satellite provider should keep giving you a signal that you can watch on any TV set.

Additionally, Congress is looking to make \$65 million available to non-full-service TV licensees to assist them in the digital transition, although the money is not available yet, and the present law requires grant priority to non-profit licensees and stations in communities of under 10,000 population. The grants will be administered by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), which in a separate grant program for translators decided not to give any money to stations in communities with a population over 20,000.

Are you as a broadcaster confused about who will be able to watch what starting February 18, 2009? Think of how confused your friends and neighbors must be, especially technically challenged senior citizens. We are now less than eight months away from the Transition, which leaves precious little time for educational efforts to take hold. We'll keep our fingers crossed.