



NEWS

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FCC Proposes Major Market TV Broadcasters and Program Distributors Introduce Video Description for Persons with Visual Disabilities

Washington – November 18: The FCC today proposed that commercial television broadcasters in the top 25 television markets, and the largest national video programming distributors, introduce video descriptions in their transmissions to allow Americans with visual disabilities to better follow the visual action in television programs.

Video description involves the insertion into a TV program of narrated descriptions of settings and actions that are not otherwise reflected in the dialogue, such as the movement of a person in the scene. Video description is typically provided through the use of the Secondary Audio Programming (SAP) channel so that it is audible only when that channel is activated through a TV set or a VCR with SAP capability.

In a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking issued today, the FCC asked for comment on a proposal that the initial video description rules should require that broadcasters affiliated with the ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC networks in the top 25 television markets (as determined by the Nielsen Designated Market Areas, DMA, rankings) provide a minimum of 50 hours per calendar quarter (roughly four hours per week) of described prime time and/or children's programming no later than 18 months from the effective date of its video description rules. It also asked for comment on requiring the larger video programming distributors to carry the described programming of the broadcasters affiliated with the top 4 networks, and of nonbroadcast networks that reach 50% or more of MVPD households.

The Commission said video description would make television programming more accessible to the more than eight to twelve million persons with visual disabilities that cannot be corrected with ordinary glasses or contact lenses. It said that since television programming is the principal source of news and information and provides hours of entertainment every week to American homes, visual description would eliminate the difficulties that persons with visual disabilities have with following the visual action in this programming.

The Commission said that video description could also benefit the one and a half million children between the ages of 6 and 14 with learning disabilities by capturing their attention and enhancing their information processing skills. It also said there could be a secondary audience for persons without disabilities who are doing several things at once, who need to attend to something during a program, or who leave the room during a program.

Today's rulemaking proposal follows two earlier FCC studies of video description: a July 1996 report following a Notice of Inquiry on closed captioning and video description; and a January 1998 report that was included in the FCC's annual report to Congress on competition in the market for video programming. 1

The Commission said that the proposed video description rules are generally modeled after existing closed captioning rules, but that because video description technology is not as developed as closed captioning technology, it would proceed incrementally to implement video description requirements so as to not impose a significant burden on video programming distributors.

In the NPRM, the Commission noted that public television stations have been airing video description programming for more than a decade, and said that the WGBH Descriptive Video Service has described more than 1600 PBS programs, including daily, weekly and special programming. However, the Commission said that since few commercial broadcasters or cable systems have provided described programming, less than 1% of all television programming contains video description.

In the NPRM, the Commission said that it is proposing to initially limit video description rules to analog broadcasters, but that it intended to apply the requirements to digital broadcasters in the future. It said that the flexibility inherent in digital technology may make the provision of video description even easier and less costly. However, it said that the conversion from analog to digital television broadcasting is currently in transition and that it did not wish to wait for the digital transition to be complete before adopting video description requirements.

The Commission also asked for comment on eventually applying video description rules to all video programming distributors, including TV broadcast stations, cable operators, direct broadcast satellite operators, home satellite dish providers, open video system operators, satellite master antenna television operators, and wireless cable operators using channels in the multichannel multipoint distribution service. It said this could enhance the availability of the service and provide a level playing field among distributors.

The Commission reiterated its goal of maximizing video description benefits to persons with visual disabilities without imposing an undue burden, and it asked for comments on the costs of video description, including the cost of upgrading equipment.

The Commission noted that the Secondary Audio Channel is used in some markets for Spanish and other foreign language audio, and it asked for comments on whether this could conflict with the implementation of video description, and if so, how to prevent or minimize the problem. The Commission also asked for comments on how emergency public safety messages, that scroll across the TV screen, could be accessible to persons with visual disabilities. The Commission also asked for comment on the nature and scope of its authority over video description.

Action by the Commission November 18, 1999, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (FCC 99-353) Chairman Kennard, Commissioners Ness, Furchtgott-Roth, Powell and Tristani.

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