

SEPARATE STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS

Third DTV Periodic Review

We are now less than two years from the end of the digital television transition on February 17, 2009. Unlike the previous “85% test,” this is a hard deadline. There are no exceptions, no second chances. We have one opportunity to get this right.

The stakes could not be higher for everyone with an interest in the DTV transition – consumers readying themselves for the end of analog broadcasting; public safety authorities counting the minutes until they can use their spectrum; advanced wireless providers preparing to bid in the 700 MHz auction; consumer electronics manufacturers and retailers projecting consumer equipment needs; and broadcasters hoping to launch themselves into the digital future.

With so much hinging on the DTV transition staying on schedule, one would think that the switchover would be a national priority. Well—not yet. I was involved in the planning for Y2K, so I know what it looks like when an issue is taken seriously. Compared to Y2K, the transition to digital television is a stealth operation.

Broadly speaking, two things have to happen for the transition to succeed: broadcasters have to be ready to transmit digital signals, and consumers have to be ready to receive them.

Much of the initial focus has rightly been on consumers – how to make them aware that the transition is coming and what they need to do to prepare themselves. We’re way behind the curve in this regard. According to a recent survey by the Association of Public Television Stations, 61% of consumers said they had “No Idea” that the DTV transition was taking place, and another 10% expressed only “Limited Awareness.” NTIA will spend \$5 million for consumer education. As anyone who has conducted a national campaign knows, that is far from what is needed to get this job done. The hope is apparently that industry will take up the slack. We shall see.

The second part of getting consumers ready is ensuring that they don’t wake up to a blank screen on February 18, 2009. That involves the converter box subsidy program for over-the-air viewers and ensuring that our mandatory carriage rules are updated to protect cable and satellite subscribers from losing access to broadcast signals.

This item, however, is about getting **broadcasters** ready for the switchover date. I think this problem is often overlooked because people see the number of stations broadcasting in digital and it sounds pretty good. But the fact of the matter is that most stations need to take significant action between now and the end of the transition. Over 600 stations will be moving to different channels than they are operating on now, and hundreds more are operating at low power and will need to ramp up. It means the possibility of hundreds of new transmitters, antennas, filters, exciters, and other types of equipment. It means the construction of new towers. It means scheduling tower crews

and coordinating with other stations. It means lining up financing, zoning approvals, and international coordination. It means getting Commission applications on file and granted. And it means doing it all in less than two years in a country in which construction is impossible in numerous areas for much of the year.

That's why I'm pleased that the Commission adopted the proposal to require every broadcast station in the U.S. to file a DTV Transition Plan with the FCC. First, the stations will tell us where they are today. Second, stations will tell us what they need to do by February 17, 2009 – the equipment they need, the construction that needs to take place, the regulatory and other hurdles they need to clear. Third, stations will provide us with a timeline for how they plan to be ready by the switchover date. Finally, these plans will be available on our website so everyone can review them. I thank the Chairman and my colleagues for working with me on this.

Might things still go wrong? Sadly, yes. Even if we closely monitor what's going on and try to address problems as they arise, there is no guarantee of success. But our odds are infinitely better than if we sit back and hope for the best. I recognize this effort may absorb substantial Commission time and resources over the next two years. Given the other pressing issues before us, I do not take that prospect lightly. But the effort is worth it. This is not a drill—it's the real deal.