



Government spectrum needed to address shortfall

By Tom Schatz, contributor

August 10, 2015, 07:30 am

The auction of 65 megahertz (MHz) of AWS-3 spectrum that ended in January 2015 raised more than \$40 billion and expanded the capacity of wireless carriers to deliver better and faster service. Unfortunately, even after that auction, the demand for spectrum will exceed supply in 2017 and the deficit will grow to 366 MHz by 2019, according to a June 24, 2015 report by the Brattle Group.

While the upcoming broadcast incentive auction that is slated to begin the first quarter of 2016 will free up more valuable spectrum, the shortage could be reduced even further if the federal government would make more unused or underused spectrum available. Even then, according to CTIA-The Wireless Association, after spectrum is acquired, it takes an average of 13 years to prepare the spectrum for wireless use.

Three days in July underscored this predicament.

On July 27, 2015, former Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Julius Genachowski and former FCC Commissioner Robert McDowell published an op-ed describing the importance of increasing the available spectrum for mobile data traffic while touting America's leadership in 4G mobile technology. However, without sufficient spectrum, that position could change. Since the federal government still is sitting on nearly 70 percent of the spectrum best suited for broadband technologies, the authors provided several suggestions to free up that spectrum, including providing agencies with financial incentives to relinquish spectrum that is not being used or not being used efficiently, as well as sharing spectrum with the private sector.

On July 28, the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Communications and Technology held an oversight hearing on the FCC. Most of the testimony and questions from legislators focused on the March 2016 auction, when broadcasters will relinquish spectrum to be resold to mobile carriers. But Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), who understands the need for spectrum beyond the auctions, asked FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler for a comprehensive report on the amount and type of spectrum currently held by the government, as well as how much of this spectrum was in use.

On July 29, the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee held a hearing on "Wireless Broadband and the Future of Spectrum Policy," which covered both the growing need for spectrum and whether the federal government is doing all it can to make unused or underutilized spectrum available for mobile data use. During the hearing, former National Broadband Plan Executive Director Blair Levin, who is now at the Brookings Institute, stated that the National Broadband Plan may have underestimated future spectrum needs. Thomas Lenard, president of the Technology Policy Institute, echoed the

Genachowski-McDowell op-ed when he testified that the federal government holds between 60 to 70 percent of spectrum suitable for broadband.

Ensuring that the U.S. has sufficient spectrum is critical to the nation's future. Given the time it takes to reallocate available spectrum, any delay in making more spectrum available could adversely affect the nation's ability to retain its leadership in advanced technology as well as slow down mobile data traffic. Therefore, the federal government must take immediate action to make any unused or underutilized spectrum available for repacking and auctioning to the private sector.

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