FCC Finalizes Rules For Television White Spaces

In an action that won the praise of wireless and consumer groups, the FCC unanimously adopted a Second Memorandum Opinion and Order yesterday that finalizes rules for unlicensed wireless use of digital television “white spaces.” Resolving various technical and legal issues associated with the FCC’s original white space order of November 2008, yesterday’s ruling partially fulfills the spectrum objectives of the National Broadband Plan (NBP) in which the FCC affirmed that 500 MHz of spectrum is needed over the next ten years to satisfy burgeoning demand for new wireless broadband services. Unlike spectrum that is currently used for unlicensed Wi-Fi services, unused white space channels in the 470-698 MHz bands are capable of supporting wireless broadband transmissions that can travel over great distances and can penetrate through walls. To spur cost-effective development of mobile handsets and other devices that operate on white space channels, the FCC eliminated its earlier requirement that white space devices that incorporate geo-location capabilities must also include sensing technology to detect the signals of adjacent TV and wireless microphone stations. Instead, such devices will query a special geo-location database, to be designed by the FCC’s Office of Engineering and Technology (OET), which will identify what other entities (if any) are transmitting on or near affected white space channels in any given locality. Although the FCC declined requests to allow OET approval of sensing-only devices, the order encourages “continued development of this capacity, because we believe it holds promise to further improvements in spectrum efficiency in the TV spectrum” and “will be a vital tool for providing opportunistic access to other spectrum bands.” Among other things, and to ensure interference protection for adjacent wireless mic operations, the order also sets aside two vacant UHF channels between channels 14 and 51 for wireless mic use. Describing the new wireless services that will utilize the white space bands as “Wi-Fi on steroids,” FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski predicted that “this new unlicensed spectrum will be a powerful platform for innovation.” As the Wireless Innovation Alliance praised the order as “the first step in continuing meaningful spectrum reform that makes markets work more dynamically,” Public Knowledge Legal Director Harold Feld voiced hope that “the FCC will give the technology the maximum flexibility to reach its potential and not burden the spectrum with requirements that would restrict its reach.” Declaring that its goal in the white spaces proceeding “has been to ensure America’s continued interference-free access to high-quality news, entertainment and sports provided by free and local television stations,” the National Association of Broadcasters said, “we look forward to reviewing the details.”

Lawmakers Call For Smart Grid Access To White Space Spectrum

Just days before the FCC’s vote to open up television white space spectrum for unlicensed wireless broadband use, two House Democrats from California urged the
agency to permit the usage of smart grid devices, such as digital electricity meters and home energy management systems, in the white space bands. In a letter addressed to FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski on Tuesday, Reps. Doris Matsui and Anna Eshoo asserted that operation of smart grid applications and similar technologies in the white space would “advance our nation’s clean energy needs” and would benefit utilities as well as consumers. According to Eshoo and Matsui, the proposal would enable consumers “to use their computer and wireless devices to monitor their energy usage in ‘real time,’ whether they are at home, at work or on vacation.” Noting that “utilities will be able to better manage outages, reduce peak demand, and gain more control over the decisions concerning resources,” the lawmakers also told Genachowski that their plan could eventually enable utilities to conduct automatic or remote meter reading and broadcast consumer alerts on electrical outages. While voicing support for “efforts the FCC is making to finalize policies that will allow devices and technologies to fully leverage the white space spectrum,” Eshoo and Matsui proclaimed, “we should be promoting policies to reach energy efficiency goals.” The National Association of Broadcasters—which has voiced concern that unlicensed wireless transmissions in the white spaces could interfere with digital television stations that operate in adjacent frequency bands—declined to comment on the letter.

**FCC Proposes 2012 Digital Transition For LPTV Stations**

In one of its final actions pertaining to last year’s digital television (DTV) transition, the FCC adopted a rulemaking notice (NPRM) last Friday that proposes a 2012 deadline by which low-power television (LPTV) stations would be required to vacate their analog spectrum. Although full-power TV stations throughout the U.S. were required to complete the DTV transition by June 30, 2009, more than 7,400 LPTV stations and TV translator facilities that operate primarily in rural areas were exempt from that deadline. Noting that the NPRM corresponds with National Broadband Plan recommendations that call for the repurposing of former TV broadcast spectrum in the 700 MHz band for wireless broadband services, the FCC stated that “it is now appropriate that the 700 MHz band be cleared of [LPTV] broadcasters, both analog and digital, by a specific date so that new commercial wireless and public safety entities can continue to deploy their services.” Figures provided by the FCC show that 56% of the nation’s LPTV licensees have already begun the transition to digital spectrum and that two percent of such stations have requested authority for digital operations in the 700 MHz band. For these “out of core” stations that would have to transition a second time, the FCC proposes that such stations would have to apply for alternative channels by June 30, 2011 and move out of the 700 MHz band by December 31, 2011. For all remaining LPTV stations, the NPRM seeks comment on “when in 2012 would be the best time to require an analog shutoff” and “how to address ‘hardship’ cases for those stations that, despite their best efforts, are unable to make a timely conversion.” Among other things, the NPRM also seeks input on how viewers should be educated about the LPTV digital conversion and on whether the FCC should undertake “a targeted initiative for selected communities nationwide to increase awareness.” Acknowledging that consumers will not be able to take advantage of the digital converter box coupon program that was promoted heavily as part of last year’s DTV transition, the FCC has also asked for comment on the availability of converter boxes for analog LPTV viewers. Describing the proceeding as “a complex undertaking,” FCC Commissioner Michael Copps voiced optimism that the agency “will learn from the previous transition and improve upon it.”

**McAdam Named As President, COO Of Verizon**

Verizon Communications set the stage Monday for the potential successor to current CEO Ivan Seidenberg with the selection of Lowell McAdam as the company’s president and chief operating officer (COO). Seidenberg, who has led the nation’s second-largest fixed line telecom carrier since it was born from the merger of Bell Atlantic and GTE in 2000, is expected to retire next year, and a Verizon spokesman characterized McAdam’s appointment as “an important step in the succession process.” Sources also say that the naming of McAdam, the CEO of Verizon Wireless, as the parent company’s president signifies the importance of Verizon’s wireless operations to the carrier’s future. Since McAdam assumed the leadership of Verizon Wireless—the nation’s largest mobile telephony firm—in 2006, the carrier’s revenues have nearly doubled from $38 billion per year to more than $62 billion in 2009. Over the same period, subscribership at Verizon Wireless has also surged from 59.1 million to 91.2 million customers. As president and COO, McAdam will fill executive seats at Verizon Communications that have been vacant since former president and COO Dennis Stirgl retired from the
company in 2009. While reporting directly to Seidenberg, McAdam will oversee wireline and wireless operations at Verizon as well as the company’s service operations and technology. Daniel Mead, now the executive vice president and COO of Verizon Wireless, will succeed McAdam as Verizon Wireless CEO, and current Verizon Wireless chief marketing officer John Stratton will replace Mead as Verizon Wireless COO. Following on the announced retirement of Verizon Communications Chief Financial Officer (CFO) John Killian, officials also confirmed the appointment of Verizon Telecom and Business president Francis Shammo as the company’s new CFO.

MetroPCS Is First To Market With LTE Network

Regional wireless operator MetroPCS achieved an important industry milestone on Tuesday by becoming the first carrier in the nation to launch fourth-generation (4G) wireless network services that are based on long-term evolution (LTE) technology. The debut of MetroPCS’ LTE service in Las Vegas, Nevada precedes the widely-anticipated launch of Verizon’s LTE network in 30 major markets later this year as well as AT&T’s projected LTE rollout in 2011. Until Tuesday, the Clearwire venture led by Sprint-Nextel has been the sole provider of 4G wireless services in the U.S., although Clearwire’s 4G network is based on the rival WiMax standard. MetroPCS, which boasted 7.6 million subscribers nationwide as of the second quarter and has built its business on pre-paid services, has promised to extend its contract-free policy to its LTE service package. The company’s LTE subscribers will be charged $55 per month for unlimited voice calls, text messaging, and data. Access to NBC Universal TV shows and other premium video content will also be offered for an additional $5 monthly charge. Samsung Electronics, which supplied equipment for the Las Vegas LTE build out, will produce a dual-mode handset, dubbed The Craft, which is capable of operating on the MetroPCS LTE and CDMA networks and will retail for $299 after a $50 rebate. In remarks to reporters, MetroPCS CEO Roger Linquist said that 4G smart phones based on Google’s Android operating platform and other LTE-capable handsets would be added to the MetroPCS product portfolio by the first quarter of 2011. Linquist also affirmed that his company’s LTE service will be expanded to Los Angeles, New York, Dallas and other key markets by the end of this year and in 2011.

AT&T Rolls Out Satellite Phone Service

Overcoming a delay of several months, AT&T on Tuesday introduced the TerreStar Genus, the first phone in the AT&T lineup to provide satellite-based connectivity throughout the U.S. as well as terrestrial third-generation (3G) wireless coverage. Priced at $799, the new device provides wireless customers with voice and data coverage, via the TerreStar satellite, in remote areas of the U.S. where AT&T’s terrestrial 3G network cannot reach. Launched last year, TerreStar-1 ranks as the largest telecommunications satellite in existence and provides coverage of the continental U.S., Canada, Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands from the 111° West Longitude orbital location. Following on last year’s launch, AT&T and partner TerreStar Networks had aimed to roll out the Genus smart phone during the first quarter of this year but postponed that plan for six months to complete device and network testing. Unlike traditional satellite phones that tend to be bulky, the Genus phone is lightweight and resembles a slightly thicker BlackBerry. Featuring a 2.6-inch touch screen and a full-alphabet keyboard, the Genus runs on the Windows 6.5 mobile operating system and enables users to switch to satellite coverage with the touch of an on-screen button. The device will retail at $799 with no contract, and customers will be required to purchase one of AT&T’s existing 3G voice and data plans as well as a separate $25 monthly plan that provides satellite coverage. The rate for satellite calls will be $0.65 per minute, with text messaging and data transmissions to be priced at $0.40 per message and $5.00 per megabyte, respectively. Users will also have to ensure a clear line of sight to the southern sky to ensure satellite-based reception. AT&T plans to market Genus satellite phone services to government agencies, utilities, “corporate responsibility” customers, and prospective subscribers in the transportation, energy and shipping sectors. The service may eventually face competition from the Harbinger-SkyTerra venture, which expects to roll out its hybrid satellite/fourth generation wireless “LightSquared” network throughout the U.S. next year.
EC Adopts Agenda For Next-Generation Broadband

To fulfill its goal of bringing basic broadband services to every European household by 2013 and fast or ultra high-speed broadband services to every household by 2020, the European Commission (EC) approved three measures on Tuesday that include recommendations on (1) regulated access to next-generation broadband networks, (2) allocation and harmonization of broadband service spectrum, and (3) promotion of private and public investment in high-speed broadband networks. In the words of EC Vice President-Digital Agenda Neelie Kroes, the measures will “help ensure that Europeans get the first-class Internet they expect and deserve, so that they can access the content and services they want.” The first measure on regulated access prescribes a common regulatory approach to high-speed broadband services which “requires national telecom regulators to ensure an appropriate balance between the needs to encourage investment and safeguard competition.” While emphasizing that the proposal envisions “no regulatory holidays” for dominant carriers, the EC stressed that price regulation of fiber optic networks should “fully reflect investment risk and . . . enable investing companies to make attractive profits.” With respect to spectrum, the EC said European Union (EU) member states should complete by 2012 the process of licensing wireless broadband operators that intend to utilize spectrum in the 900/1800 MHz, 2.5 GHz and 3.4-3.8 GHz bands that had previously been harmonized by the EU. Member states were also advised to free up channels in the 800 MHz band for wireless broadband use by 2013. In its third measure on public and private investment, the EC offered guidance on the reduction of investment costs and how public authorities could make better use of EU funds as it called on member states to “introduce operational broadband plans . . . with concrete implementing measures, including provisions for the necessary funding.” Sources say that the spectrum measure will be forwarded to the European Parliament and to the EU Council of Ministers for approval.

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