

Chairman Dingell at the Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet hearing entitled "Status of Digital Television Transition"

Statement of Congressman John D. Dingell, Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND
THE INTERNET HEARING ENTITLED "STATUS OF DIGITAL TELEVISION TRANSITION"
MARCH 28, 2007

Mr. Chairman, I commend you for holding this hearing. This is the first oversight hearing on the digital television transition since the law that set a hard date to turn off analog television was enacted more than a year ago.

Consumers deserve a clear picture of the digital television (DTV) transition. This Committee will work hard in the coming months to see to it that public and private stakeholders are doing all they should to prepare consumers.

Much will be gained for our country if the transition is done properly. The timely return of the spectrum will produce significant public benefits, particularly for first responders and wireless innovators. Indeed, led by my good friend Rep. Stupak, many of us voted to use the bulk of the spectrum auction proceeds " \$5.8 billion " for first responder interoperability. Unfortunately, the law that was enacted by the previous Congress set aside far less funding for first responders.

Decisions being made now by this Administration and others will lay the foundation for the success of the transition. Good decisions that put the consumer first will go far toward ensuring a timely return of the analog broadcast spectrum.

Consumer adoption is the linchpin to a successful DTV transition. I suspect few consumers know that they will need to purchase new equipment to keep their analog televisions working. We must reach all Americans with accurate information about the transition date and the coupon program.

The law established a first-come, first-served converter box coupon program. When that money runs out, many households, including those dependent upon free over-the-air television every day for their local news, weather, and emergency alerts, may be left with a blank screen.

Retailers must provide consumers with simple and useful information. When consumers walk into a store, the necessary equipment, including the eligible low-cost converter boxes, must be in stock and visible on the shelves. Consumers should see effective informational displays and be able to pick up coupon applications right at the store where the boxes are sold. Sales associates should accurately answer questions and assist coupon holders in obtaining eligible low-cost boxes.

Consumer electronics manufacturers must also make certain that affordable converter boxes are produced in sufficient

numbers and available to retailers in the proper time frame. Given that coupon distribution will begin in January 2008, I am curious whether orders have been placed to produce the low-cost boxes and in what quantities. How will manufacturers market, promote, and test the boxes? Will there be installation or antenna assistance? Will product labeling easily identify coupon-eligible boxes?

The most crucial part of any consumer education campaign is the efforts of the broadcast industry itself. Broadcast television is a powerful medium to reach consumers. Local broadcasters must begin a thorough public education campaign as the coupons become available next January. Broadcasters should partner with local retailers and community organizations to promote outreach to hard-to-reach populations.

Cable and satellite operators must also do their part. They must provide accurate and appropriate information to guide their subscribers through this transition.

Importantly, Government agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) must step up their efforts. There has been too little appreciation for the task of properly informing and equipping American households. It is the responsibility of the FCC to inform all Americans about the transition, and to coordinate the technical steps required to usher in full digital broadcasting. NTIA must conduct consumer outreach regarding the coupon program and keep Congress adequately informed on the progress of their efforts.

As we prepare for February 2009, we should not forget that we are asking ordinary people to pay for a Government decision that essentially makes their television sets obsolete. For that reason, we should ensure that this transition is as painless as possible for American consumers.

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