

June 5, 2009

David K. Rehr
President and Chief Executive Officer
National Association of Broadcasters
1771 N Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Mr. Rehr:

One week from now, on June 12, 2009, our nation will transition to digital television, or DTV. As you know, on this day, full-power television stations across the country will cease broadcasting in analog and will switch to digital signals. This change will require millions of households to take action if they wish to continue to receive free, over-the-air television.

In order to provide consumers, government, and the broadcast industry with adequate time to prepare for the transition, earlier this year I introduced the DTV Delay Act. As a result of the passage of this legislation, I believe the nation is better prepared for the upcoming switch to digital broadcasting. In the last several months, we have made great strides in readying households across the country for the DTV transition. Since enactment of the DTV Delay Act, the coupon program at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has issued 10.4 million new coupons. The disastrous waiting list for coupons that this Administration inherited from its predecessor, which at its height had 4.2 million coupon requests, has been fully addressed. Today, no such waiting list exists. In order to help consumers better manage the transition, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has awarded 45 contracts that establish over 12,000 walk-in DTV help centers across the country. Finally, statistics from The Nielsen Company demonstrate that as of mid-December, the number of completely unready households was 7.75 million or 6.8 percent of all television households in this country. By late May, this number fell to 3.1 million, or 2.7 percent of television households. As a result, the number of completely unready households has been reduced by 60 percent.

Despite this significant progress, I am concerned that millions of consumers are still unaware of the transition and are unprepared for its consequences. I know that broadcasters in West Virginia and across the country are working hard to prepare their stations and viewers in their markets. But I worry that too many households lack the in-home assistance they may need to secure converter box coupons, acquire converter boxes, attach them to their sets, and obtain a new television antenna, if necessary. In addition, I am concerned that viewers are inadequately prepared for signal losses due to changes in antenna placement and digital signal propagation, and may require notification from local broadcasters to better understand this situation. Furthermore, I fear that in the week ahead there will be a surge of calls to broadcast television stations from local viewers, and worry about the ability of stations to handle these call volumes and assist viewers directly.

Finally, last year I introduced the Short-term Analog Flash and Emergency Readiness (SAFER) Act to encourage and permit stations to continue analog broadcasting of emergency and transition information for 30-days after the switch to digital broadcasting, where technically feasible. This nightlight service would provide critical information to viewers caught unprepared for the transition. On May 13, 2009, the FCC issued a list of 825 eligible stations in 202 markets. I urge the NAB to encourage at least one station in each eligible market to participate in the nightlight program. Your stations should not leave their viewers left behind without a helping hand.

I ask that you address my concerns by responding to this letter in advance of June 12, 2009. Furthermore, I seek assurances that the broadcasting community will continue to assist consumers who need help in the weeks following the transition. Finally, I wish to note that television is not only about entertainment, but provides vital news and information that keeps us connected to our communities and the world. So I trust that you understand how important it is that in the DTV transition, no household is left in the dark.

Sincerely,

SENATOR JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER IV