

FCC Consumer Advisory

The DTV Transition and LPTV/Class A/Translator Stations

The digital television (DTV) transition refers to the switch from analog to digital broadcast television. Congress has mandated that, by June 12, 2009, full-power television stations will stop broadcasting in analog, and will broadcast in digital only. While the majority of consumers in the U.S. can receive the programming of full-power over-the-air stations, there are three other categories of broadcast TV stations – “low-power,” “Class A,” and “translator” stations. Although these types of stations also must eventually switch to digital broadcasting, there is currently no deadline for them to turn off their analog signals.

The FCC established low-power television (LPTV) service in 1982 to provide opportunities for locally-oriented television service in small communities. These communities may be in rural areas or may be individual communities within larger urban areas. More than 2,100 licensed LPTV stations are in operation. LPTV programming can include satellite-delivered programming services, syndicated programs, movies, and a wide range of locally-produced programs.

Class A TV stations are former LPTV stations that have certain interference protection rights not available to LPTV stations. These stations are technically similar to LPTV stations, but unlike LPTV stations must air at least three hours of locally-produced programming each week and comply with most of the non-technical regulations applicable to full-power stations. Approximately 600 licensed Class A TV stations are in operation.

A TV translator station rebroadcasts the programs of a full-power TV broadcast station. TV translator stations typically serve communities that cannot receive the signals of free over-the-air TV stations because they are too far away from a full-power TV station or because of geography (such as uneven terrain or mountains). Many of the 4,700 licensed TV translator stations operate in mountainous or more remote areas of the country.

There are several ways to determine whether the broadcast stations you view over-the-air (with a rooftop antenna or "rabbit ears" attached to your TV) are LPTV, Class A, or TV translator stations. Class A stations are required to visually or aurally identify their stations with their community of license and call sign (that includes the suffix “-CA” for Class A) at sign on, sign off, and on an hourly basis. LPTV stations also must regularly identify their station call sign. When locally originating programming, they must visually or aurally identify their call sign and community of license at sign on, sign off, and hourly. LPTV call signs may consist of four letters followed by the suffix “-LP” (for low power) or, alternatively, five characters beginning with the letters K or W followed by two numbers (their operating channel) and two additional letters.



TV translator stations rebroadcast the programming of a full-power station, but on a different channel. Your television will indicate the channel on which you are receiving the programming. If the station you are watching with an antenna (and not through a paid provider such as cable or satellite) identifies itself with a different channel than the one indicated on your TV, you are likely receiving the programming from a TV translator station. If you are unsure of the status of a particular station, contact that station. Further, LPTV, Class A, and TV translator stations may regularly broadcast information as to their status, and may include information regarding the DTV transition.

While the June 12, 2009 deadline for ending analog broadcasts does not apply to low-power, Class A, and TV translator stations, the FCC will require these stations to convert to digital broadcasting sometime thereafter. More than 2,100 of these stations have been authorized to construct digital facilities and some are broadcasting in digital already. The FCC is currently considering the remaining issues involved with the low-power digital transition and will make decisions regarding these stations in the future.

If you have an analog-only television that receives free over-the-air programming (with a roof-top antenna or "rabbit ears" on the TV), you will need to purchase a digital-to-analog converter box in order to watch digital broadcast television. Each U.S. household is eligible to receive two \$40 coupons to be used toward the purchase of two digital-to-analog converter boxes. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is administering the coupon program. More information can be found at www.dtv2009.gov, or by calling 1-888-388-2009 (voice) or 1-877-530-2634 (TTY).

Because the \$40 NTIA coupons program is offered for a limited time, you should consider applying for the coupons and purchasing coupon-eligible digital-to-analog converter boxes now, even if you only watch low power, Class A, and TV translator stations. As noted, these types of stations will have to switch to all-digital broadcasting in the future, and in order to take advantage of the government-sponsored coupon program, you will have to request your coupons now. (Please note that these coupons will expire 90 days after mailing).

If you purchase a digital-to-analog converter box to watch digital broadcasts on an analog TV and also wish to continue watching analog LPTV, Class A, or TV translator stations, you should purchase a converter box with "analog pass-through" capability, which allows analog broadcast signals to pass through the converter box to be tuned by your analog TV. NTIA's coupon program has certified converter box models that have analog pass-through capability. A current list of coupon-eligible converter boxes is available at www.ntia.doc.gov/dtvcoupon/cecb_list.html. The converter box models that have analog pass-through capability are noted on the list with an asterisk next to them. In addition, NTIA will mail a list of current coupon-eligible converter boxes, noting with an asterisk those that have analog pass-through capability, to each household that receives converter box coupons. You can also check with your retailer to determine whether the converter box you are purchasing has analog pass-through capability.

If you purchase a digital-to-analog converter box without analog pass-through capability, you can use an "A-B switch" and/or a "signal splitter" and some extra cable to route the analog signals around the converter box in order to watch analog channels. A set-up guide is available at www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/converterbox-analog-digital.html.



Or, you can disconnect the antenna from the converter box and re-connect it directly to the TV to watch analog broadcasts. Check with the manufacturer of the digital-to-analog converter box and your retailer if you need additional instructions on how to connect the box to view broadcasts from both analog and digital stations.

For more information about the DTV transition, go to www.dtv.gov or contact the FCC by e-mailing dtvinfo@fcc.gov; calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554.

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