

Start preparing now for digital TV

By U.S. REP. JOHN D. DINGELL • February 15, 2008

The countdown has begun. One year from Sunday, television stations will stop broadcasting in traditional, analog format and will switch to digital. On that day, Feb. 17, 2009, a Tuesday, analog televisions not connected to a converter box, cable or satellite will go dark as our nation undergoes one of the most significant technological changes in history.

Consumers need to begin preparing today to ensure their television sets work after the digital television transition.

The DTV transition will bring enormous benefits. Some frequencies used for analog broadcasting will be freed up for advanced wireless service, while others have been set aside to improve the communications capabilities of first responders, a key recommendation of the 9/11 Commission.

The transition will also bring benefits to viewers. Many television stations are using the efficiencies of digital broadcasting to provide viewers with more free channels. Digital also means sharper images and improved sound quality.

The tens of millions of Americans, however, who receive their television over-the-air will have to obtain an additional piece of equipment to ensure that their sets work. These viewers will need to purchase a digital-to-analog "converter box." (Sets connected to cable or satellite service will not be affected).

Ensuring that this change occurs with minimal consumer disruption and confusion will not be a simple task. To give one a sense of scope: In 2005, the Government Accountability Office estimated that more than 20 million households nationwide could lose service on one or more television sets. Almost half of these households have annual incomes of less than \$30,000. The majority of them are headed by either an elderly person or a native Spanish speaker. Clearly, some of those expected to be most affected by the transition may also be the most difficult to reach. If it is not handled correctly, we can expect much consumer angst and confusion next February.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration in the U.S. Department of Commerce is responsible for implementing a program to distribute coupons to subsidize the cost of converter boxes. Every household is eligible for two

\$40 coupons, each of which can be used toward the purchase of a converter box.

I have concerns about the implementation of this program. Current policy dictates that these coupons expire after 90 days, but consumers might have trouble using them within that timeframe if the stores in their areas run out of boxes. The expiration deadline simply creates inconvenience and confusion. Many of my congressional colleagues and I recently wrote NTIA, requesting that consumers be allowed to reapply for coupons if theirs expire.

Another challenge is educating the public. A recent Consumers Union survey found that of those Americans who will have at least one television affected by the transition, nearly two-thirds (61%) incorrectly believe they are not affected, do not know that they are affected, or are completely unaware of the transition.

The Federal Communications Commission, the agency charged with overseeing our nation's airwaves, should take the lead here. While I am pleased that the FCC is poised to unveil a plan for educating the public, I am concerned that the Bush administration is naive about the resources that will be required.

The administration's most recent budget request asks for an additional \$20 million for consumer education. This will not be enough to educate a nation of 300 million people.

All of us have a role to play in this transition. I pledge my own best efforts. The Committee on Energy and Commerce has already held four hearings on the digital television transition, and we will continue exercising vigorous oversight to ensure the administration does its part. Consumers also have a responsibility to educate themselves. They may start by visiting <http://energycommerce.house.gov,www.dtv2009.gov>, or calling 1-888-DTV-2009 to learn more.

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