WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Ted Stevens said on Wednesday he supported setting 2009 as the year for completing the transition to higher-quality digital television.

U.S. lawmakers have been debating when to require television broadcasters to shut off their analog signals and only air digital. Current law sets the deadline as either December 31, 2006 or when 85 percent of the television audience can receive digital, whichever comes later.

Since most Americans have yet to buy the new television sets or equipment needed in part because of their high cost, experts have said the transition could take a decade.

"With a 2009 hard date, there would be three Christmas buying seasons during which Americans will buy digital television sets," Stevens said in remarks to the Association of Maximum Service Television conference.

Stevens, an Alaska Republican, said his committee would consider on October 19 a bill to set the date.

The government plans to auction most of the analog airwaves to commercial wireless providers, a sale that is expected to raise billions of dollars. Some airwaves would be set aside for public safety organizations.

Stevens and other lawmakers want to use some of that auction money to partially subsidize equipment to convert digital back into analog for those households that cannot afford to buy the expensive new sets.

"Our converter box program will attempt to ensure that consumers who cannot buy a digital television set will still be able to watch TV with a converter box," Stevens said.

Draft legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives would set January 1, 2009 as the deadline for completing the digital television transition.
US Senate Commerce boss backs 2009 digital TV move - Yahoo! News

Reuters/VNU

deadline for completing the digital television transition.

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