Some TV stations to end analog signal on Feb. 17
(AP)

NEW YORK - Television viewers who use antennas and were expecting a few more months to prepare for digital TV may not have much time left before their sets go dark: Many stations still plan to drop analog broadcasts in less than two weeks.

When Congress postponed the mandatory transition to digital TV until June, it also gave stations the option to stick to the originally scheduled date of Feb. 17.

That means the shutdown of analog signals, which broadcasters had hoped would happen at nearly the same time nationwide, could now unfold in a confusing patchwork of different schedules.

Lawmakers wanted to address concerns that many households that receive TV signals through an antenna are not prepared for the switch. They were also mindful that a government fund has run out of money to subsidize digital converter boxes for older TVs.

Dozens of stations around the country now say they are going to take advantage of the option to drop analog broadcasts this month.

Many others are on the fence. The total number is likely to be in the hundreds, a substantial chunk and maybe even a majority of the country's 1,796 full-power TV stations.

The House voted Wednesday to delay the mandatory shutdown until June 12. The Senate passed the measure unanimously last week, and the bill now heads to President Barack Obama for his signature.

The legislation means analog signals could vanish entirely in some areas but persist in neighboring regions. In rural areas, low-power stations will continue to broadcast in analog even beyond June 12.

On Thursday, the Federal Communications Commission ordered stations that still plan to turn off analog signals on Feb. 17 to notify the FCC by Monday.

Acting Chairman Michael Copps said the commission could prohibit stations from making the switch if doing so is not in the public interest. For instance, if all stations in a market want to turn off early, that would draw FCC scrutiny, he said at a commission meeting.

For many broadcasters, delaying the shutdown is inconvenient and expensive. Many of them have scheduled engineering work on Thursday, the Federal Communications Commission ordered stations that still plan to turn off analog signals on Feb. 17 to notify the FCC by Monday.

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The transition to digital TV is being mandated because digital signals are more efficient than analog ones. Ending analog broadcasts will free up valuable space in the nation's airwaves for commercial wireless services and emergency-response networks.

In a few areas, including Hawaii, stations have already abandoned analog broadcasting.

TVs connected to cable or satellite services are not affected by the analog shutdown. But that still leaves a lot of people who could see channels go dark on Feb. 17. According to research firm MRI, 17.7 percent of Americans live in households with only over-the-air TV.

Most of them are ready for the analog shutdown, according to the National Association of Broadcasters and analysts at the Nielsen Co. Nielsen said Thursday that more than 5.8 million U.S. households, or 5.1 percent of all homes, are not ready.

At the Oklahoma public broadcasting association, Norman believes viewers are ready for the switch. The network has invited viewers to call in with transition questions on several nights. Each time, the number of callers has been smaller, Norman said.

"We really don't think it's going be as major of an issue as people anticipated," he said.

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AP Television Writer David Bauder contributed to this report.