WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. local television broadcasters said on Tuesday they would accept a 2009 deadline to switch to airing only higher-quality digital signals, a date being considered by lawmakers.

However, they urged Congress to give consumers the choice of receiving the new signals as-is or converting them to analog so that they would work on older television sets -- and to require cable companies to carry extra channels broadcasters offer.

"Broadcasters accept that Congress will implement a 2009 hard date for the end of analog broadcasts, and we're ready," Edward Fritts, president and chief executive of the National Association of Broadcasters, which represents hundreds of local stations, told the Senate Commerce Committee.

The Senate and U.S. House of Representatives are considering setting late 2008 or early 2009 as the date for completing the transition to digital television signals.

Current law requires local television stations to give up their analog airwaves only when 85 percent of the country can receive the new digital signals or on Dec. 31, 2006, whichever comes later.

Sen. Ted Stevens, an Alaska Republican and the committee chairman, told reporters after a hearing that the deadline for completing the digital switch-over should be set sometime in 2009.

One of the biggest concerns confronting lawmakers as they grapple with setting a final deadline is that most Americans do not have new sets or converter boxes capable of receiving the digital signals. A subsidy program is one possibility under review.

"If you want an uproar from the people of this country, you have their televisions turned off," cautioned Sen. George Allen, a Virginia Republican.

Stevens said he also wanted to move up the date when all televisions sold in the United States would have to be able to receive digital signals. The Federal Communications Commission has set a July 1, 2007 date for most sets to be capable and is already considering moving that up.

The demands for cable companies to carry extra digital channels and analog signals drew a rebuke from Kyle McSlarrow, president and chief executive of the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, who said the goal was instead to free up
the airwaves for public safety organizations.

"Nothing the broadcasters have proposed has the slightest bearing on how you can best ensure the return of the spectrum and how you can do so with a minimum of inconvenience to consumers," McSlarrow told the Senate committee.

The government wants to sell the old airwaves used by broadcasters to wireless companies and provide some of them for public safety communications. The sale could also reap billions of dollars and potentially fill a budget gap.

Some senators expressed impatience at the prospect of waiting several more years, saying the lack of spectrum would hinder emergency workers in the event of an attack.

"The bombings last week in London reinforce the immediate need for this spectrum," said committee member Sen. John McCain, a Republican from Arizona.

© Reuters 2005. All Rights Reserved.

More Technology

- ASML says new chip tool marks biggest jump in years
- Microsoft warns of software flaws in Word, Windows
- Microsoft unveils keyboard for Media Center PCs
- Sheryl Crow in tune with Dell for new promos
- Yahoo adds new Web search capabilities to HotJobs

Weather on your website
Add weather to your website - Free
Get a weather sticker now
WeatherOnYourWebsite.com

Africa Weather
Find Africa Weather Reports asWell as Maps, Photos & Travel Info!
www.concierge.com

Las Vegas Slots Tips
Beat the Las Vegas slots!Win $1000/day guaranteed.
SlotMachinesMastery.com