Broadcasters Agree to Go All Digital

After resisting for years, TV stations agree to stop transmitting analog signals in 2009.

By Alex Pham and Claire Hoffman, Times Staff Writers

Hastening the long-delayed switch to digital television, broadcasters on Tuesday agreed to stop transmitting analog signals in 2009, potentially rendering millions of rabbit-eared sets obsolete.

The about-face by broadcasters — who had long resisted a federal mandate to switch completely to digital — clears the way for a change in television no less significant than the transition to color more than 40 years ago, advocates said.

"Broadcasters accept that Congress will implement a 2009 hard date for the end of analog broadcasts," said Edward O. Fritts, president of the National Assn. of Broadcasters. "And we're ready."

Digital technology delivers crisp pictures, vibrant colors and clear sound, and the end of analog TV will free billions of dollars' worth of crowded broadcast spectrum. But for couch potatoes, the transition may also mean junking outdated television sets and spending billions to upgrade.

That's because most current TV sets won't receive over-the-air digital signals without a special adapter, expected to cost $50 to $75. The next big debate: whether the government should subsidize that cost with the windfall it is expected to reap when it auctions off unused frequencies.

More than 1,500 stations today — the vast majority of local broadcasters — are transmitting programs in both digital and analog formats. At issue is when the stations would have to turn off their analog signals.

Most TV sets that take their signal from cable or satellite feeds won't be affected because cable and satellite providers can convert the transmissions for their subscribers.

Although the federal government in 1997 required television stations to switch to all-digital signals beginning in 2007, broadcasters dragged their feet. Television stations contended that it would cost too much to adapt their equipment and that they would lose viewers unable to afford new sets.

The broadcasters' reluctance delayed the adoption of digital television because confused consumers held off on purchases and consumer electronics manufacturers continued to produce the more popular analog sets.

But the National Assn. of Broadcasters dropped its opposition during testimony before the Senate Commerce Committee. That cleared the way for Congress to adopt a hard deadline this year.

TV manufacturers, which stand to benefit from higher sales of digital sets, applauded the association's reversal, saying the move would be good for consumers. By July 2007, all new TVs with 13-inch or larger screens must have a digital tuner.

"With consensus now forming around a firm date, we will have certainty," said Michael Petricone, vice president of technology policy for the Consumer Electronics Assn. "Manufacturers will know what to make. Retailers will know what to sell. And consumers will know what to buy."

How many TVs would no longer work in a switch to digital is hotly contested. Consumers Union, publisher of Consumer Reports magazine, believes that 15% of U.S. households rely on over-the-air analog broadcasts. A February report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office put the figure at 21 million households, or about 1 in 5 homes. And the Consumer Electronics Assn. puts the figure at 32.7 million sets, or about 12% of all TVs in use today.

The figures don't include TVs connected to cable or satellite services that can convert
digital broadcasts to the analog format used by conventional sets.

Still, consumer advocates say the number of TVs that would go dark is large. And the cost to consumers to enable those sets to receive digital signals can be as high as $3 billion, according to Consumers Union, an advocacy group that says the government should foot that bill from the estimated $10 billion gained by selling the highly coveted spectrum now used by TV broadcasters.

"The enormous struggle now is how to help consumers use their current TV sets to receive digital signals without having to pay a fortune for new technology," said Gene Kimmelman, Consumers Union's senior director for public policy.

Several lawmakers support using a portion of the auction proceeds to fund a subsidy. House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Joe Barton (R-Texas) has talked about a $500-million pot, limiting the subsidy to the poor. Others, including Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), contend that every affected household should be compensated.

"The core of any digital TV bill that Congress approves should ensure that all affected consumers have some government-backed remedy to restore the signals that the government has turned off," Markey said. "Even today across the country, Americans will be walking into retail outlets and buying analog-only televisions."

At the Best Buy store in Atwater Village, television shoppers were circumspect.

"It's like when they switched from black and white to color," said Michael Diaz, a 25-year-old substitute teacher from Whittier. "It had to happen."

Health clinic owner Magnus Robinson of Los Angeles, who owns six TVs and was plunking down $5,000 for another one, said the change would not affect him because he paid for cable.

"But there are a lot of people who can't afford it," he said. "We are supposed to help one another. That's putting a hurt on somebody."

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