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FCC Watching ATSC 3.0 Development for Incentive Auction Repacking Process, Lake Says

The FCC is closely watching the development of the ATSC 3.0 standard for potential use in the incentive auction repacking process, said Media Bureau Chief Bill Lake in a low-power TV LEARN webinar Tuesday. Broadcasters disagreed the next day in interviews about ATSC 3.0's time frame. Some said the commission could recover more spectrum in the auction with 3.0.

The commission is moving forward with the auction time frame, but will consider a standard if one is presented, Lake said in an interview Wednesday. "If the standard is available and has been considered by the commission during the 39-month period, certainly it would be a possibility that that standard could be used in the repack of full-power stations and by low-power stations as they're being displaced," he said on Tuesday's webinar. The commission requires full-power and low-power stations to use the existing ATSC standard, he said.

ATSC 3.0 "is on track to become a candidate standard by year-end and we are confident that it will be a solution that works for high-power and low-power broadcasters alike," ATSC President Mark Richer told us Wednesday.

The new standard would make the commission's auction task easier, said LPTV lawyer Peter Tannenwald of Fletcher Heald. Updating to 3.0 would let the commission recover more spectrum because of the capability to repack tighter, he said. ATSC 3.0 is OFDM-based (orthogonal frequency-division multiplexing) and allows a smaller amount of interference protection, said Mike Gravino, director of the LPTV Spectrum Rights Coalition. "If the FCC waited for the standard or allowed the standard to be implemented in the repack, it could repack more tightly," he said. "It could conceivably fit four more low powers per market in the repack. That's half of the low-power service. For us it's a major deal."

Lake suggested LPTV and translator stations take advantage of 3.0 when it's available and use single-frequency networks to use spectrum more efficiently. The 3.0 standard will make it possible to do more with less spectrum, Lake said in Wednesday's interview. "That can actually make channel sharing more attractive" as an option, he said.

"Having that standard out as soon as possible and being able to repack with it is key," Gravino said. Broadcasters have to update to a new standard anyway, he said. "We shouldn't be forced to repack to a 20-year-old standard." ATSC 3.0 will be developed during the repacking time frame, Tannenwald said. But several organizations have to endorse the standard before the commission will adopt it, including the ATSC, NAB and major networks, he said. "I'm not confident it will get all the way through the process within 39 months," he said. "The commission has a lot on its plate right now. It's a big ask to do this while they're trying to do the auction. They're not in a hurry to referee what the standard should be."

The ATSC is a private body, and "that's the rub," Gravino said. The FCC has to wait for a standard to be decided and then put it forward and "the rest of us have to wait," he said.

Sinclair proposed its own next-generation TV standard said Mark Aitken, the company's vice president-advanced technology and chairman of the ATSC Television Systems Committee. Next-gen TV standards will offer more video capacity, he said. "There's lots of tools in the toolbox of next-gen that can offer some opportunities for survival for low-power stations." A question facing broadcasters is should they transition during or after the repack, he said. "You're not going to change out a facility until you know where you're going to end up."

ATSC 3.0 won't necessarily be backward-compatible, Gravino said. Until the consumer electronics industry creates TVs for the standard, users will need a dongle on the receiver end, he said. These TVs can be made today, but it comes down to patents, he said. Actually, 3.0's framers from the beginning have said the next-gen system won't be backward-compatible and needs to be that way to represent a big fundamental shift from the existing ATSC standard. The commission should concern itself only with the physical transmission mechanism of the standard, Aitken said. "That piece which produces our frequencies," he said. "They regulate all the constraints of operating within that spectrum-power level, density, emission characteristics, how much spills over into adjacent bands, the interference criteria."

Over the past six months, the commission has homed in on the message that if ATSC 3.0 is ready, "there's every likelihood that broadcast operators will be in a position to use ATSC 3.0," Aitken said.

Lake's message is reflective of a consistent message to broadcasting to get the standard done and present it for approval, Aiken said. "I don't think the FCC can answer all of the questions that all of the broadcast industry has asked. There's too many open questions." — **Marlena Chertock and Paul Gluckman**

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