

Communications

Wireless Coalition Goes Public to Advocate for Spectrum Policies

Bureau of National Affairs

The Wireless Broadband Coalition (WBC), a new public policy advocacy organization, made public its goals Sept. 28, stating that it is dedicated to improving the quality, reliability, security, and availability of mobile broadband services.

According to a statement by the coalition, it will be a voice for pro-consumer spectrum management policies in Washington and include leading companies representing the wireless, telecommunications equipment, manufacturing, and Internet service sectors of the economy.

The coalition has been in operation for a little over a year now, and this is the "public" rollout of the coalition's agenda, said David Taylor, executive direction of the coalition. The coalition has operated below the radar screen until now, advocating for wireless companies on spectrum policy, he said.

"We wanted to get more public now because of some real successes related to spectrum," Taylor said. The recently concluded advanced wireless services (AWS) spectrum auction is one example, but there are other spectrum issues in play. "And we wanted to become more public in those discussions as we move forward," he said.

The group has worked with the Federal Communications Commission and administration officials on the spectrum that will be released in the transition to digital television. A large swath of spectrum in the 700 MHz band that is currently being used by broadcasters to transmit an analog signal must be returned to the government by Feb. 17, 2009.

In legislation governing the transition to digital television, lawmakers directed the FCC to begin auctioning the returned spectrum no later than Jan. 28, 2008. The spectrum is considered prime "beachfront" spectrum because of its excellent propagation characteristics.

Understanding Spectrum's Value

The coalition worked with budget officials and lawmakers to ensure that they understood the value of the spectrum, which will set the stage for the auction, Taylor said. Indeed, legislation to complete the transition to digital television was included in a large deficit reduction package (Pub. L. No. 109-171).

The coalition also has weighed in on policies affecting both licensed and unlicensed use of spectrum, Taylor said. For example, both want access to the "white spaces" or vacant spectrum channels now assigned to broadcasters, he said.

In one case, there was a move to change the FCC-approved band plan for the digital television transition to make 6 MHz more spectrum available for unlicensed use. "We worked with lawmakers to make sure they understood what those changes would do for the auction--how that would affect auction bidders and the auction results," he said.

Although the coalition advocates for licensed spectrum, it is also interested in "complementary" uses of unlicensed spectrum, Taylor said. T-Mobile USA plans to use unlicensed spectrum to


complement its network for their customers. Verizon Wireless is exploring uses of unlicensed as well, he said.

Another goal of the coalition is to protect against interference with licensed users, so they can provide reliable, secure service to their subscribers.

The coalition will not be launching an ad blitz or anything so "high-profile," Taylor said. Instead, it will focus on decisionmakers, knowing that some big spectrum decisions are going to be made in the many months ahead. One focal point will be to keep the digital television auction on schedule, he said.

Wary of Modifications


There are some proposals to modify the FCC's digital television band plan for allow for a variety of other uses, Taylor said. "We want to see public safety get the spectrum that they are supposed to get, and we'd like to have commercial users get the opportunity to bid on the remainder of that spectrum," he said.

For example, a controversial proposal by Cyren Call Communications, a wireless provider, would increase the total amount of spectrum allotted to public safety from the current 24 MHz to 54 MHz (83 DER A-17, 5/1/06) . The plan would take an additional 30 MHz of spectrum that is currently slated for auction out of the auction process. The FCC has put out the proposal for comment, but FCC Chairman Kevin Martin has stated that he does not believe the commission has the authority to implement that plan without congressional approval.

There are other proposals, but as the recent AWS auction proves, spectrum is valuable, Taylor said. There are financial reasons why people want spectrum at a discount or for free, for some public policy reason, while industry has an interest in preventing any "sweetheart" deals, he said.

"Our coalition is focused on market-based spectrum allocations through auctions," which have public benefit, Taylor said.

The coalition is separate from CTIA--The Wireless Association, which is the nation's largest trade association representing wireless carriers. The coalition works in tandem with CTIA on some issues, but it is more narrowly focused on spectrum issues and policy than the larger association, he said.

The Wireless Broadband Coalition's members include Verizon Wireless, Qualcomm, EarthLink, Lucent, Nortel, Cingular Wireless and the CDMA Development Group. 

By Cheryl Bolen